

El Gabacho

by Jared Ward

A fig tree stood in the center of the yard. The grass was thin and brown, hardly different from the dirt driveway that came to the front door. White paint chipped and peeled from the weathered panels of the house. I was seven and naked in the front yard.

"Hey, Matthew, you need to hide," hissed my cousin Pauly as he slipped around the back of the house. Pauly was thirteen and not naked.

Marisol leaned against the tree, halfway through her twenty count already. I followed Pauly and the others. Since the fig tree was the only thing in the yard besides my mother's yellow Vega, the game consisted of everyone sneaking to the far side of the house until whoever was "it" got done counting. Then it was a matter of running circles around the house until someone was tagged. Sometimes it came down to a chase around the car or the tree, but mostly it was house circling.

I was the youngest by three years, and I crept behind them as the Southern California sun burnt every inch of my body. They were used to it, as my mother was one of the only Mexican hippies in Bakersfield. She let my hair grow long and insisted to my aunts that if I didn't want to wear clothes, then I didn't have to. I didn't want to wear clothes.

As Marisol finished counting, our group edged closer to the front of the house. Ramon, the oldest and fastest, peered around the corner to see if she was coming. The main obstacle that way was my grandmother's garden, filled with all kinds of flowering cactus.

"Hey, Ramon, can you see her?" asked Pauly.

Ramon shook his head and glanced back at the rest of us. "No, but if she comes this way, you putas better move." I didn't know what a puta was, but I knew I would be getting out of his way as fast as I could.

"Ready or not, here I come," called Marisol.

She came flying towards the front of the house, her chunky arms and legs pumping, her face snarled in effort. Ramon made good on his promise and bulled his way past us. I gathered myself, turning to run when an elbow struck my shoulder and knocked me off my feet, into the garden.

I landed on my chest in a row of short cacti, needles piercing my skin. I pushed up, sticking my hand in another row and rolling backwards into two taller plants that left their barbs along the length of my back. I lay there for a moment, too stunned to scream, before standing. Like a miniature Frankenstein, I walked stiff-legged, arms held away from my body. As I stepped back to the safety of brown grass, Marisol ran up to me. I sucked in my breath and stared at her. Everyone else was gone.

She looked me over. Then she shrugged and reached out a finger, poking my forehead.

"You're it," she said, and darted off to tell the others.

I made my way, whimpering to the front door. Pauly came running around the corner.

His eyes went wide when he saw me. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head no.

"Come inside, Granny Lupe will take care of you." He took my good hand and guided me to the door. All of my cousins were sitting on or around the Vega, whispering and poking each other as we passed.

"Pinche gabacho," I heard Ramon say, and the others burst into laughter.

"Calláte, pendejos... el niño es familia," Pauly snapped at them.

Ramon slid off the hood with his arms out. "Sí, pero míralo. No lleva ropa, y corre alrededor... es un idiota."

Pauly put his hand up and pulled me towards the door. "Enough, Ramon, that's enough." He opened the screen door and called inside, "Granny Lupe, come here, Matthew fell in the stickers."

When I was little, Granny Lupe used to tell me the story of my parents. I would sit in the kitchen while she made dinner, pestering until she gave in. I heard my mother's, and I heard my father's, but Granny's version has always been my favorite.

They met picking peaches in the San Joaquin Valley, just outside of Bakersfield. For my mother and her six sisters, it was the family business. My father was a rich white boy from Orange County, running as far from his privileged upbringing as possible. It was a luxury of the rich, to vacation in the barrio with the migrant workers and border jumpers, to trade a 3,000 square foot home with a swimming pool and tennis court in the back yard for a one-room efficiency on the outskirts of town. Most of the other workers never accepted him. Granny said it was because he had more than peaches and oil. He could always leave, and they hated him for it, even when he did.

He used to say that he never planned to fall in love. I can't help but wonder. It was, after all, the Summer of Love, with everyone from Bob Dylan and Jerry Garcia to Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg espousing the virtues of free love, blind love. My father was looking for something different, something to give his life a meaning he couldn't find in the gated communities or country clubs back home.

My mother was definitely different.

By the time he came to town, she had grown feral, a wild woman that people watched from afar. She was striking, with her long black hair, brown skin, and piercing black eyes that smoldered like a doused fire.

But all he saw was her beauty, and he thought it went all the way through. It must have been like diving into a pool of clear blue water, only to find that it's so cold you can't breathe when you come up for air. You swim to the shore and crawl on the sand, and it's never as pretty as it once was, even from a distance.

Three months after they met, she was pregnant with me. He was from a good family with good values. He wanted to marry her.

"Come away with me," he begged, holding her hand as she looked away. "I'll go back to school so I can get a real job, we can live with my parents until I graduate... we can make this work."

She looked at him as if he were an insect pinned to cardboard. "What?"

"I love you," he said, and tried to kiss her.

She blocked his lips with her hand, pushing away as she stood up. "No, no, no," she said, shaking her head. "You don't love me."

"No, I really do, listen - "

"No." She fixed him with her glowering eyes. "You listen. I don't need your love. I'll raise this baby, and we don't need your help."

His hands couldn't quite reach her. "Can we even talk about it?"

She turned to the window, staring into the dark. A smile crept to her lips and she laughed softly. "No, we can't. I'm Mexican and we speak Spanish." The smile vanished and she moved to leave. "No sé qué decir... sólo puedo llorar. Nada de despedidas," she said, and left him forever.

That was the story, at least how I remember it. In the end, all that really mattered is that she left him, so he left us. He drifted east, running to a world he already knew. He landed in central Kansas where his family came from. He finished a degree in teacher education, framing houses for his uncle to pay for school.

I spent little time with him growing up. Sometimes he would drive back and take me to his parents' house up north for a week. But when he was in Kansas, he would call me four or five times a week, quizzing me for hours about state capitals and presidents until I was the only six-year-old in Bakersfield who knew the capital of Vermont or had even heard of Grover Cleveland.

There were two main things I knew about my father. First, he was safe, though I couldn't have phrased it that way. When we went to his parents, there were board games and puzzles and color tv. They had pet beagles, KC and Patches, and a Siamese cat named Boots. There were no strange men around at bedtime, and I had my own room.

Second, I looked just like him.

At James Madison Elementary, on the south side of Bakersfield, I attended kindergarten. I took naps in between Mike Sandoval and Willie Cordero. I sat behind Maria Sanchez. I was five shades lighter than any kid on the playground.

We did a family tree project in first grade, and I brought in a page littered with Martins, Kindigs, and Schmidts on one side, Velasquez, Garcias, and Silvas on the other. I handed it in proudly. Granny Lupe helped me the night before, getting names from my father and handing me stickers to hang in my tree. The teacher posted the trees on the wall during recess, and when we came in, everyone gathered to read them.

Whispers began floating as the flow of students bottlenecked near mine. I heard a girl ask, "Keen-deeg? What's that?"

Albert Martinez, my math buddy, nudged me. "Your tree's weird."

Later that day, I spilled orange juice on my tree and had to take it down. The teacher blotted the paper, trying not to smear it, then rolled it up and wrapped a rubber band around each end.

"Here, Matthew," she said, handing it to me. "Now be careful, that's your family."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. When I left school, I checked three times to make sure no one was looking before I threw it away.

"Hey, mijo, how was school?" my mother asked when I got home. She had her hair done, so I knew she was leaving soon.

"Fine," I said.

She came over and gave me a kiss on the head.

"Such a smart boy I have," she said. "I bet you're the smartest kid in class."

I just smiled and she hugged me.

"Okay, Granny is at Nene's, but she'll be back soon. I'll be out with friends, so don't wait up."

"Okay."

She blew me a kiss as she left, and I went to our room, resolving that someday I would find out what a keen-deeg was.

"Ay, mijo, look at you."

Granny Lupe sat on the toilet seat next to the shower, holding a bowl and a rusty pair of pliers Pauly brought from the shed. She plucked every needle she could find, placing them in the bowl. The cool water washed all but the deepest ones away.

I stared out the window, through the yellow curtain, thin and faded. Even through the haze of cloth the sun shone. I watched as the highest branches of the tree next door swayed in the breeze, focusing on the trembling leaves as needle after needle worked its way out of my skin.

"Okay," she said, turning off the water and wrapping me in a towel. "Can you feel anymore?"

I shook my head.

Outside, my cousins had congregated near the side of the house, not far from the bathroom window. With the water off, we could hear them talking through the thin walls. Ramon was picking on Marisol and Rebecca, but everyone was laughing. The front door shut, and we heard Pauly rejoin the group.

"Hey, Pauly," called Ramon, "How's the gabacho?"

"Why do you have to be so mean to him, Ramon?"

Her drying had slowed, and I looked up at her while the conversation continued outside. "Granny, what's a gabacho?"

She paused for a moment, then smiled and sat me on the edge of the tub, wrapped tightly in my towel. "That's what some call the white people."

"Oh. Granny?"

"Sí, mijo?"

"Am I a white person?"

Her smile grew wider, and she tussled my hair. "No, you're a little person, with red spots all over his body." She rolled me side to side in the towel and leaned close. "You're familia. You know familia, sí?"

I nodded.

"Okay then, go play with your cousins."

I started down the hall, stopped, and turned back to her.

"Granny?"

"Sí, mijo?"

"I think I want to put some clothes on."

She rose, took me by the hand, and led me to the other room.

