

Carlos The Impossible (Part 2)

by JTK Belle

Fifty thousand mouths went all agape.

Nonplussed, Hernando eyed the beast. Carlos remained still, looking up only briefly into the sun seats where the drunks laughed with swollen red faces.

Thinking he'd struck bone, Hernando wiped his brow with his silk suit sleeve, retrieved the damaged sword, walked to the relichero with his back to the bull and was handed a replacement, which he inspected against the sideboard with a heavy thwack, and then marched solemnly back toward center ring.

Carlos followed the matador with his eyes.

Hernando took position, inciting Carlos again with the cape.

Carlos walked toward Hernando and made an effort to catch the cape with his horn. Emboldened, Hernando waved the cape again and stepped around to Carlos's rear. Curious, Carlos circled with him. They did this slow hat dance several times, until the crowd grew restless.

Basta! they cried.

To the end! they cried.

Lowering the muleta, Hernando set Carlos's head low and prepared to plunge the sword deep between the shoulder blades. But when he did, again the sword bowed and snapped, shooting upward and out of the matador's hands, arcing end over end and falling to the ground.

Hernando's invectives circled the ring, echoing up into the warm, still afternoon air.

You will need an elephant gun! they cried.

From behind the barrera wall, a drunk tossed an empty bottle that shattered in the outer ring, causing both Carlos and Hernando to turn their heads at once. The bull's left horn caught Hernando

high up on the thigh and threw him upside down through the air. Blood sprayed into Carlos's eyes as he heard a shriek and the matador's body thump to the sand.

Two peónes darted through the slits in the barrera and pulled him toward the railing, blood trailing behind him in a long black tail. Hernando struggled to return to the bull, clawing for the sword. The picadors grabbed his feet but he slashed at them with the sword until they held up their hands and backed away. Then he flailed wildly in the direction of the bull, pulling himself on his elbows, lines of blood now crisscrossing in the sand.

Hernando lost himself at the bull's front hooves, with his sword held back, ready but unable to strike. The wide-eyed peones dragged him quickly backward with shuffling feet as Carlos stood motionless, red-tipped horns held high, Hernando's blood dripping down from his nostrils.

As they raised Hernando over the rail and hoisted him onto a stretcher, Hernando came to just long enough to pardon the bull. *Save this one*, he said. *I will meet with him again.*

Yes, it is true that Hernando pardoned the bull, staying an unlikely execution. This was no noble gesture, as a matador might make for a particularly valiant bull after a particularly noble fight. For Hernando intended only to return and kill this bull himself.

This act, the pardon, was, of course, unnecessary, for as the picadors said among themselves, *Who could kill this impossible bull?*

Hernando spent forty-three days in hospital, in a suite once occupied by a twice-gored Jamie Bravo, his slowly improving vital signs reported daily in *El Norte*.

The Great Matador's recovery was complicated by infections and malaise. His suite overlooked a circular garden filled with well-kept zinnias, dahlias, and marigolds. In his narcotic hallucinations what he saw there was a bullring: a magical ballet played out in cloud shadows and blowing leaves, surrounded by long-stemmed aficionados blowing kisses and applauding him with rose petals. Hernando saw himself there, fighting the giant bull with a duvet for

a cape and a maguey frond for a sword, both of which he dragged wearily behind him as he desperately circled an impossible beast. Sweat poured from him as he was weaned from the morphine and finished the last of the antibiotics that were fed to him through intravenous tubes.

On the forty-fourth day, he left the hospital, emerging from the halogen halls, squinting into the daylight and walking with the assistance of a crook-handled acacia cane. Quickly he was surrounded by a throng of paparazzi at the hospital lobby doors.

How do you feel, matador? the throng barked from behind flashing bulbs. *Will you fight again?* To which he responded only with silence, turning to stare out the window of his chauffeured sedan as it departed, and daydreaming of the day he would rejoin the impossible bull in the ring and put him to his overdue death.

A year passed. Gradually, Hernando regained his footing, dispensed with the crook-handled acacia cane, and at last sat for a Televisa interview that was broadcast on the eve of the following season:

Journalist:

How grave were your wounds?

Hernando:

Not too serious, really.

Journalist:

But you spent forty days in hospital.

Hernando:

For exhaustion, it seems. And dehydration.

Journalist:

I understand the horn discovered the femoral artery.

Hernando:

They tell me it was grazed, yes.

Journalist:

With three trajectories!

Hernando:

I did feel a tickle down there.

Journalist:

Will you retire from the ring?

Hernando:

I think not.

Journalist:

So then what is next for you, matador?

Hernando:

I intend to return to the Plaza and kill the giant bull come November.

Journalist:

You mean to say you are planning for a rematch? With the very same bull?

Hernando:

I prefer to think of it as a continuation after intermission.

Carlos spent the Mexican winter lying in the cool shade of a calabash tree on a rolling cactus-hilled breeding ranch in Tlaxcala where Hernando knew the owner, the famed Don Fausto Meza, well; as a favor to his friend (and for his own sport), Hernando would often test the ranch's young bulls for bravery and form in the private sessions they call the *tientas*.

On Carlos's first day there, the ranch's herd of twenty calves receded in unison to the far side of the field to escape the enormity of the imposing stranger. When Carlos approached them with his nose to the ground and his morning shadow coming at them like a blackened cape, their eyes widened as they parted and then fled with stuttering gaits to the rocky foothills (looking over their shoulders as they went). Don Fausto feared that Carlos had unsettled the young bulls and sapped their courage, so he instructed his vaqueros to build a new fence of mesquite wood and river rocks and cleave the field in two. One side for Carlos where he idled away the long days alone under the winter sun, and one for the suspicious little toros that kept well back of the barrier that separated them from their fearsome cousin.

The ranch hands were no less spooked than the baby bulls. Don Fausto told them only half in fun that he thought the giant bull was the reborn spirit of the evil one they called Huay Chivo and not to look the thing in the eyes.

4.

La revancha! The rematch between the great matador and the impossible bull was set for La Fiesta de la Objeto Inamovible. Red-lettered posters announced the event on shuttered tiendas and busy bus stops and papered-over graffiti on the city's walls for all of September and October. During those long, hot weeks, across cantina tabletops, in street cafes and tequila bars from Tijuana to Vera Cruz, aficionados debated the merits of man versus bull. They debated with the fevered logic of fanatics and the foulest language of philosophy. They argued on the television and on the radio, they argued at work and at home, over cold meals, under warm sheets, and with the purple prose of letters between quarreling lovers.

Inevitably, the gambling houses began accepting wagers on the bullfight. But how? Who had ever taken odds on the bull in a bullfight? As the debate wore on, the betting line hopped like a jumping bean from side to side, until the last placid November week when the odds finally settled at three to one in favor of the bull.

The day arrived under calm blue skies. Ah, pulsing butterflies, budding gooseflesh and the high adventure of an afternoon at the corrida! Hernando spent more than his usual passive few moments in the Plaza's chapel that morning, praying with studied efficiency to the Virgin of the Macarena. Then he repeated his routine of superstitions for good measure—massaging his earlobes and the soles of his feet, touching the wallet-worn picture of his first bull, Hamartia, and one in profile of the great Arruza, then silently reading that old poem of Lorca's.

When he finally took to the ring with a deep breath and a signing of the cross, the crowd rose to its feet and roared, a show of respect that defied the betting line that so favored the bull. At this,

Hernando puffed with pride and his stomach, which had betrayed him with flutters, calmed once again.

While Hernando drank in his ovation, Carlos stood up in his too-small pen beneath the pulsating Plaza and listened as the brass band played *The Spanish Gypsy Dance*. He listened fondly to the familiar booming tuba. When the refrain came around he held his head high and his black nostrils flared wide and rang in the chorus with the tuba bell. The gypsy dance grew louder as the floorboards above him shook under the long parade of those taking their seats in the shade. Dust settled on his snout and he discarded it with a lick of his salty tongue.

Soon enough, a slightly built man with his hair in a ponytail approached Carlos's pen on the balls of his feet. The man blew a quick breath and slid back the rust-chipped bolt in the gate. The gate swung open with a loud creak and the man called, Ah-ha, ah-ha! as he backpedaled up the ramp and into the arena. Carlos double-stepped through the open gate and followed the man up the ramp toward the soothing sounds of the tuba.

Trumpets blew. The crowd leaned in. When Carlos reached the top of the ramp and emerged from the shaded chute, the crowd stood again and they roared and they jeered at equal decibels. In all the corridas de toros in all of Mexico and far beyond, never had there been such an incongruous reaction at the entrance of a bull to the bullring.

Carlos took in the crowd happily, not at all perturbed by the strange contrast of noises swirling in the round. But what became of the tuba? He scanned the great amphitheatre from right to left, and then left to right. Fifty thousand round faces looked back down at him. The one belonging to the presidente of the Plaza was long and mustached and glowed with delight. The presidente's companion's was tight with the corners of her mouth pointed downward. The drunks in the sun seats slapped their hats and frothed with glee, and the ladies in the shade either clapped their hands politely or fanned themselves with their programs or folded their parasols in their arms. Carlos observed one and then another along the long rows

behind the barrera without note. But when Carlos's eyes settled on the man who stood on the sand twenty paces before him, they widened with a soft glow of recognition.

Hernando's emerald eyes darkened under arched brows. His fingers tightened around the handle of his sword. He put out of his mind the foot-long scar that meandered upward from his knee to his groin like a crack in a dry riverbed.

No picadors appeared. No banderilleros were called in. Hernando's men sat stone-faced behind the barricade, prepared, on order of the matador, to intervene only at his demise.

As a hush drew over the Plaza, Hernando made a circle around the giant bull. Carlos followed him with only a turn of his head and shoulders, until Hernando reached the rear side on his right flank, and then the bull turned his head to the other side to watch the man emerge again from shadow.

Hernando's thoughts were drawn to Lorca:

Now the dove and the leopard wrestle/At five in the afternoon...

Carlos did not charge. Hernando closed the distance between them with a straight back and a stiff neck and presented the red cape.

Carlos sat down on his hindquarter.

Someone yelled Olé! which drew a crescendo of laughter.

Hernando spat in the sand and cursed under his breath.

Arsenic bells and smoke/At five in the afternoon...

Minutes passed.

Hernando willed the giant bull forward with little gestures.

Mocking Olés! showered down on Hernando like tiny banderillas, until finally and again the burning intensity of the matador's emerald eyes pulled Carlos to him and at last Carlos made a passive attempt at a charge.

The bass-string struck up/At five in the afternoon...

And another.

The Plaza crowd let out a series of slow-rolling Oooooooo-lés. After several more cautious passes at the cape, Hernando's

confidence grew. He inched closer to the point of the horn with each pass, not for the benefit of the aficionados but only for himself.

It was five in the afternoon...

More rolling Olés.

Enough of this, Hernando thought.

The final pass. Hernando dropped Carlos's head with the cape and jumped higher now, landing the sword precisely in the spot he intended—just between the shoulders, at the centermost point on a line with the giant aorta beneath.

It was five in the afternoon...

Suspended in the air, his hand removed from the sword, which held firmly in the animal's hide, Hernando felt a moment of joy like no other. Before gravity took hold—before it could return him to the dry sand below, as he simply hung there like a golden specter of the Fiesta Brava, held aloft by the whistles of the faceless crowd—the corners of his mouth began to lift, along with his eyebrows and then his cheeks and then his ears, all together and at once into the beginnings of a...smile.

Groups of silences in the corners/at five in the afternoon...

And then, too soon, he began to fall. As the matador landed, Carlos's right hind hoof stepped directly onto Hernando's turned-out ankle, snapping the bone. A revolting Pop! could be heard all the way to the rafters.

Bones and flutes resound in his ears/at five in the afternoon...

Carlos quickly lifted his hoof and moved away with a halting, sympathetic limp.

Aaaaaay! Hernando screamed.

Hernando fell with a thump to the ground and spun wildly in a half circle. Sand caked together on his cheek and in the sweat above his brow.

Horn of the lily through green groin/at five in the afternoon...

Glancing toward his men in desperation, he quickly discarded the panic he felt crossing hotly over his face, drew himself up with a full devastated breath, and hopped gingerly to a position squarely ten paces before the bull.

I will finish him on one ankle, then! Hernando fumed through his pain. He barked at his men to remain behind the barricade and to throw him another sword. Carlos, in consideration of the matador's predicament, found himself compelled (despite the sword-tip buried shallowly in his hide) to follow the matador's urging with a benign obedience. Lowering his head, sword rising from his back, he shuffled awkwardly toward the hobbled matador, who was, it seemed, somewhat surprised by the bull's sudden surrender, and not altogether prepared to accept it.

Now the bull was bellowing through his forehead/at five in the afternoon...

Gathering up his muleta quickly, he leapt again—inasmuch as he could—but with only one leg to propel him he failed to gain the height he needed to plant the sword in the morillo. He landed awkwardly, twisted his remaining good ankle, and crumpled in his suit of lights to the ground.

Aaaaay! he screamed again.

Carlos pulled up and turned to see the matador writhing. The bull turned around slowly to face Hernando and settled gently on his hindquarter.

The wounds were burning like suns/at five in the afternoon.

Ignoring Hernando's flailing arms, his men leapt over the barricade, distracted Carlos unnecessarily with a great waving of capes, and gathered the matador to safety as Carlos sat on his tail and watched them from the center of the ring.

It was five by all the clocks! In the shade of the afternoon!

Cursed fate! Again Hernando, with maniacal desperation, pardoned the bull as he was dragged through the barrier to the ambulance that stood waiting outside the gate.

Despondence. Hernando convalesced from his beach home high on a cliff overlooking the crop of black rock formations in Zihuatanejo Bay. He sat silently for much of each day, his leg elevated atop a leather pillow perched atop a wicker ottoman, watching the occasional puff of cloud cross the watery horizon.

The uninvited voices that haunted Hernando's waking dreams spoke between the calls of the aficionados in the shadows. *Is he up to the task?* they said. *Why not let it go?* they said. *You'll get a pass. Fight a smaller bull, a normal bull.* Hernando heard them in the Plaza seats, heard them on the Metro, heard them in their homes talking back to their television sets.

One voice rose above. Whose voice? Whose voice was this? Was it Fortune? Was it folly or Fate? Our Lady of Surrender? Was it Manolete whispering from the grave? Was he whispering defeat? Was it humility? Ignominy? What sound does Providence make?

Hernando chased these thoughts from his restless mind like so many autograph seekers at the Plaza's back gate. If he fostered any doubts as to another rematch with Carlos the Impossible, those doubts did not appear in his heavy emerald eyes, which burned with crude, sweet vengeance.

When he squinted into those melting Pacific sunsets, he saw bulls in the fat red clouds.

As Hernando grew stronger and practiced his footwork—at first against an assemblage of charging, bent-at-the-waist, finger-horned peonés, and then with the baby bulls at the ranch of Don Fausto Meza—Carlos spent the year idly, pacing the dry hills of Tlaxcala and dreaming of sunflower fields and limestone bluffs and the gently flowing waters of One Hundred Mile Creek near the source of the Pequot River.

5.

The third fight between Hernando and the bull was scheduled that same year for La Fiesta de Conflicto Eterno on the last day of the bullfighting season. Hernando's ankle, though pronounced by his doctor fit to bear weight, swelled in the rain and throbbed like an acordeón. This third fight brought more gamblers than the last, and the odds settled quickly at ten to one in favor of the bull.

It will spare the reader to condense the circumstances of this fight: it proceeded much as the previous contests. Like the two before it, the third ended with what the matador would call defeat,

and the bull might call a happy truce. This contest lasted more than five hours. For those five hours, Carlos played his part as if he were bred for it, gaining speed and closing the distance between his horns and the man at each veronica. Hernando, his ankles swelling with each thundering pass and his sword growing heavy, could not find the spot between the bull's shoulders after thirty-five attempts. The crowd began to thin after three hours, and showered the ring with catcalls and the balled-up butcher paper they peeled from their tortas as they went.

The stalwarts remained until the sunset turned to darkness. Only the drunks stayed until the end to witness the Great Matador collapse from exhaustion near to midnight.

Was there ever such comeuppance? Hernando passed the offseason ignoring the laughter of the public. Ignoring the slights from breathless journalists and bemused passersby, ignoring the gossiping garnacha vendors in the marketplace. Pride leaked through his pores like helium passing through a festival balloon. He went for long stretches without the company of women.

The voices persisted. *What is this business? This messing about with bulls? Tell me again the point. What good ever came of it?* They came like unholy spirits in the night and loitered in the outer ring of Hernando's convalescent ego.

As for Carlos, he passed the off-season dreaming most often now of red capes that waved between sunflowers and pawing soft dirt under the steady watch of an emerald green eye as cold clear waters flowed from an unknown source to an unknown destination.

Despite summer months filled with endless tactical sessions and a coterie of paid advisers, the following year, the Third Rematch (in the first fight of the season) saw the oddsmakers start the betting at one million to one in favor of the bull. This, said the oddsmakers, was necessary in order to attract any bets at all for the matador.

One million to one? thought Hernando. *Can it be? Can this bull be truly indestructible?*

The sentiment among aficionados was that Hernando would never regain his swagger, never regain the very bravado that had destined him for fame. Hernando himself knew well that a good goring had ruined the confidence of many a fine matador. He'd not known his grandfather but had long felt the cold spell of that blue roan that killed him as it stared out into the parlor above the static halo of the family television. He had seen his father go weak in the knees when he returned to the ring after his brush with the end at the horn tip of the bull Conejhero. Juan's passes became quick, jumpy. Not to mention Suarez, Villacorta, Ordonez, all of whom had lost their footwork, bent back the muleta with their cowardly elbows, and lost their nerves in the ways he so despised.

No, Hernando said, it is all in the head. This bull will die by day's end, and the pinches in the tendidos will go silent with awe and the whole of the Plaza will roar with the chants of *Hernando! Hernando!* once again.

But, as the Fates had evidently designed, this fight ended as did the others: with Carlos sitting dejectedly on his tail as Hernando lay unconscious in the sand. By rights, Hernando ought not have survived, said those who witnessed things firsthand—but again he summoned the strength to pardon the bull before he collapsed into extended darkness.

He spent the year in a partial coma. Though he began to respond to certain stimuli almost immediately (long and guttural huh-huhs caused his fingers to twitch), it was not until the following November when Caron took two tails in the first two weeks of the season that Hernando sat upright in his bed and declared of a sudden that he would fight again.

When he returned, the Plaza would not take him. He offered to front the ticket sales, to no avail. They said, You should take this act to the Circus Atayde!

Though nonplussed, Hernando was not altogether surprised. All season long, he called on every empresario of every bullring large and small from Tijuana to Cozumel.

We're full up, they said.

Try farther south, they said.

So sorry, Great One, they said. Perhaps you might fight another bull?

And so Hernando bought Carlos back from the empresario of the Plaza for two hundred pesos and a half bottle of Oaxacan mezcal. With nowhere else to turn as the lust for vengeance burned on his skin, Hernando sold the villa in Las Lomas and bought for himself and for Carlos the smallish but respectable bullring in his hometown of Ronda, where his name still echoed in the ancient rafters and the feats of his youth were both remembered and imagined.

That fourth year they claimed the bull became sympathetic to the matador. Even the rheumiest gabachos in the upper seats could see that Carlos had studied the matador's passes with a critical eye. But then, any bull will learn from a matador the longer it is allowed the benefit of experience.

They claimed the bull began to develop a form of attachment. Was it ever so? Carlos, it cannot be disputed, had become an accomplice in the Spectacle Without End (as the newspapers now called it) and enjoyed the exercise and the company, if not the awkward conclusion of each fight.

Carlos, it can even be said, came after a time to relate fondly to the matador. The giant bull associated the spectacle with companionship, and sensed however faintly at a purpose if not a meaning in his part.

The gambling ceased. There was not an aficionado in all of Mexico now who would part with his money on the confidence of the matador, no matter the odds.

Small crowds came to the bullring in Ronda, at first for the fight, and then for the man—and then only for the bull. And then simply to mock and jeer at the great bullfighter in his shame.

After the fifth year, Hernando could no longer employ a cuadrilla, even with above-market salaries and a light workload.

Hernando sold the condominium in the city.

And then the crowds simply stopped coming at all. *This is the man who fought ten bulls at once? The Great One? The Legend?*

And so it went. For many years they fought like this, Hernando's spirit, like his reputation, growing tattered as an aged capote. His heart as empty as the plaza's seats.

Hernando's only chance at redemption had ever been in killing the bull. But at each faena, the tragedy ended as the last—with broken banderillas, broken swords, and an exhausted Hernando conceding defeat, unable to pierce the shoulder blades of the evermore accommodating bull.

As time went on and the contests lost the last pretense of formality, it was Carlos who shouldered the uneven weight of the performance. By now, he was settled fully into this daily routine: up with the sun each morning, a breakfast of corn and grain (or now and then the remains of tamales wrapped in banana leaves left at the gate by the wife of Don Fausto Meza), a leisurely stroll around the ring under the watchful eye of the matador. Then through the motions with a series of well-practiced charges, then pardoned with only a wave of the matador's hand, then back to his pen where he settled into his bed of hay.

Of necessity, Hernando eschewed all expense, save feed for the giant bull. Each morning, as the sun crept over the wet sands of the ring, Hernando would drag a feed sack into Carlos's pen, open the door, drop the sack on the sand in front of the bull and say, *Eat, toro, this is your last meal on this earth*. Carlos would then dutifully nod his snout and paw at the sack excitedly until it spilled open onto the ground as Hernando turned his back to the bull and walked back up the callejon to practice his veronicas to the roar of the empty seats.

If your demons offered you a truce would you take it? If your monsters put forward a middle ground would you meet them there?

Hernando would not. After seven years, the matador's anxiety became acute. His prize money, his entire life's savings, dwindled to little more than a peón's wages in the form of the pension he drew from the matadors' union. One by one, the remainder of his homes were taken from him, sold at auction. And so, he made a home of his bullring—aside from Carlos, the last of his possessions.

For ten years more it went on this way: Hernando's dementia advanced like the afternoon shade as he scripted the fights, and fought alone in the ring with Carlos the Impossible. All that remained of the corrida now was the never-ending faena.

Hernando's beard grew long and white and tangled. As the matador slowed, Carlos compensated with passionate charges, on each animated pass placing his horns just within danger of the man's torso, but only just so.

At the end of each day, Hernando sent the bull back to his stall with a familiar refrain:

Toro, you torment me.

[Carlos snorts.]

You can't know the pain you have caused me.

[Carlos burrs.]

I'm of a mind to set fire to you and be done with it.

Hernando's heart came undone like a cow hitch slipping its knot—even as that which joined them grew fast. For Carlos this tie was fastened in the familiar routine of feeding, running, and sleeping under the matador's ever-present emerald eyes. Carlos grew content with this life, though when he slept he dreamed almost always of the same orange and yellow sunflower field, the same towering limestone bluffs and the gently flowing waters of the Pequot River.

For Hernando their tie was forged in something like ardor. He slept uneasily, and dreamed only of killing the bull.

Come morning, Carlos would emerge again from the tunnel and circle the ring idly, following Hernando as a calf follows a cow.

And then the fighting stopped. Matador and bull would only siesta for long stretches in the afternoon; Hernando on his back basking in the sun, Carlos pacing the ring freely until he made a bed for himself in the shade. On occasion he would nuzzle Hernando with his snout, careful with the horns so as not to mistakenly puncture the man.

At nights, as Carlos slept in his pen beneath the Plaza's empty seats, Hernando would walk the city, pawing the streets with the tips of his toes and uttering nonsense. Other nights Hernando sat behind the barrera and watched the shadows play out generation-old performances by Arruza and Manolete, cheering them through the echoes of his own febrile laughter.

Only rarely was he recognized now by the public. Only rarely would he be acknowledged. When he was, they would say with genuine surprise, *Are you still fighting that bull?* And then they would laugh at the thought of a fifty-year-old man, who by appearance looked twenty years older still, dancing with a bull who seemed to regard the corrida as a sublime but humble amusement.

6.

It was in the twentieth year, long after the public's attention had evaporated like morning dew from the plaza sands, that Hernando succumbed to his madness in full. In the end, he had come to think like a bull. He slept in the pens or on the bullring floor. He pawed the sand as he walked, twisting his head and snorting—his long beard hiding oats and hay, his rotten teeth hiding the corn feed he shared with Carlos. He slept most comfortably, by now, in the cool shadow of the giant bull as they lay on the plaza floor, exhausted by the afternoon sun.

On his last day, he prayed to the Virgin of the Macarena for a knowledgeable crowd and a windless day, crossed himself twice, and closed his eyes. When Carlos emerged from the callejon, he stretched lazily under the morning sun, and saw Hernando slumped

sideways over a horse's saddle, motionless, dew rising up around him.

Carlos recoiled. His heart contracted, then slowed. Pain filled his chest. Adrenalin poured through him like a hundred toros running blindly through narrowing streets as he stepped toward the body of the matador, knelt, and nuzzled the cold back of his neck.

Thereafter, Carlos slept fitfully. Days of melancholy followed days of despair. What to do with this bull? Hernando's creditors asked themselves. The plaza we will keep. But the bull? Too old now to slaughter even if he could be slaughtered, too old to breed.

And what now for the bull to do?

Carlos paced the ring, ate little, sleeping much of the day and all through the night. The doctors said, This animal is under a great deal of stress.

Carlos began to thin. The giant bull dropped a thousand pounds within a month, another thousand pounds the next. Ribs pressed out from his softening skin and into the sand of his pen like the ship timbers of a scuttled galleon. Even the ancient bolts trapped in his skull became visible in bright light.

In his fitful sleep, he dreamed a full palette of colors: orange and yellow sunflowers, red flashing capes, the once-sharp look in Hernando's eyes lit in piercing emerald green.

The end comes, not with a flash of the muleta, not at the end of a pic. Carlos, having played his part, drifted toward his querencia, unrequited. Some would say it was the two bullets in his skull that finally did him in. Others would say that for a bull of that age, well, it was simply time. The poets of the obituaries proposed his soul was twinned with the great matador's like a nahual and argued the denouement was fitting:

Hernando finally killed his bull, they said.

No, the doctor said. This animal was healthy in all other respects. He simply lost the will to live.

Hernando finally killed his bull, they said.

Tumble, tumble, tumbleweed. These are the last true facts of this taurine tale:

The arrangements fell to Don Fausto Meza. Left to divine the eternal wishes of the matador, Don Fausto spread Hernando's ashes among freshly planted trumpet lilies beneath a calabash tree on a hill near his breeding ranch in Tlaxcala, where forevermore the great matador might test the young calves for courage and form.

Now, Don Fausto thought to himself as he considered the deadweight of Carlos's remains and the difficulty of their transport, what to do with the carcass of an impossible bull?

And so Carlos the Impossible was buried where he fell, below the sands of the plaza de toros in Ronda, slightly off the center, where to this day, when a bull with particular courage finds himself strangely in need of comfort, as though he could will himself away from the toreros and the crowd, he will look for a corner in the roundness of the ring, and back into that very spot, and feel a slight breeze and a gentle water current and the swaying of orange and yellow sunflowers beneath his hooves, and he will stay there for a while, until he has gathered up his wits or had them drawn out for him, before he lowers his head and charges through the Olés toward the man with the cape.

-The End-

