

Land of Manana (ruff)

by Verkaro

In the Land of Manana tomorrow knows best and is never rushed. That is why it might take five, six days, or more, for tomorrow to ever show up. Even so, never on the Sabbath.

There are those who take this inexact passage of time as a personal affront to their dignity. Directly they petition the locals that tomorrow always follow today, along with a few other nit-picks.

Take a cook who knows how to make good with what she has -- who measures out the constituent parts making up a meal with a pinch of this and a shake of that, and more, by the cupped palm of her hand - - giving expression through taste and smell and adjustment, fitting love and nourishment. What would she do with a drawer full of measuring spoons and graduated pyrex? Not much worth the pained expression of a good woman.

But of tomorrow always following today? It is so hard to make one see. Petitions were made, then as today, noted with all due solemnity and nodding later to be filed under away "insufferable" in the tourist suggestion box. It begs the question why desire a place become exactly like the one you leave behind? There is an error in judgement.

That is not to say, as much as they belong, the locals do not err. They are human. They err a lot. Happily, because they live in the Land of Manana their errors (and failings too) are inexact works and therefore, in the long run, sufferable. What follows is one such story from not too long ago, give or take a hundred years. It begins with a truism (an inexact wisdom) that troubled a handsome young couple. The truism has it that: To the smallest house are the most children born.

Martin and Guadalupe married. And by setting up home in one of the smallest of houses in the village they naturally became an item of local conjecture. But after two years they had made no children, so it was generally agreed while an attractive couple they were unlucky and simply poor.

Late one evening Martin thumped his chest. "Too much wine. Too much wine? Martin himself will say when Martin has had enough." With that he reeled with a sudden urge to get sick and laying his head on the kitchen table went to sleep.

"Bah!" Guadalupe pulled her shawl tighter around her slender shoulders. "A man who forgets himself is an embarrassment to his dog. Let him sleep."

"He wants a great house now and respect but this casita would miss him too much and inexorably go back to earth." (Translation of troubled thought often falls sadly short of the mark.)

"More dreams. Life is short." She was getting worked up along this line so that she had to go over and shake him by the shoulder. "Go to bed you!"

Martin stirred groggily.

"Go to bed you dreamer," she said. "Junk collector."

He got up and wobbled like a man missing a few essential bones and went into the bedroom. Guadalupe heard the bedsprings give under his weight. Soon there was soft snoring.

Their casita was modeled in shape after a shoebox, one made of adobe brick and stucco. In all practicality it was not much larger but it had a window on one side for the kitchen and one looking in on the bedroom near the front door. All these left open for air in the

season. It was not much but it seemed the sole remainder of a dream of children spilling out the front door after a good breakfast.

The couple was young but already there were marks of weariness about their habits. Guadalupe, wrapped in a crochet shawl, sat by her candle. A bump sounded from the bedroom. Martin had quit snoring. She went in to look on him but he was not there. Going to the window she found Martin sleeping in the yard. He was a dark shape, almost a pile of laundry. She went out and shook him.

"Get up you. Here is the great man, so full of promise. Your furnace blows cold heat. You with your magnificent glass to the stars. Get up! You never cease to impress." She was rather less exact with her complaints, but that is about the gist of it.

She struggled to get him to stand and go back inside. Once this was managed he flopped across the bed and was instantly asleep again. Guadalupe returned to her chair and tugged at her shawl. Her eyes grew heavy with weariness. There she dozed until the cat scampered noisily after a mouse.

She put a hand to the back of her neck, then pressing either cheek, woke enough to carry the guttering candle into the bedroom. The bed was empty. This time she simply took a blanket outside, came back, and climbed over the mattress and lay down.

She knew in her heart, his fear of what might have been if and if... and on and on. Go out and work, that is how simple people do. (In his absence she had to argue for the both of them.) But, a man does not grow rich who earns his wage by the hour. What good are your big ideas if we starve? How can a man find himself while his woman is unhappy... and on and on. Sleep. And I thought there is my man. What a man I have got. I could tell the whole world. She continued the conversation in her dreams.

In the morning when the Jays cried and squirrels rolled with each other on the ground Martin was nowhere to be seen except at Renaldo's house down the way. "Tell me the story of ghosts and the gold again, my friend Renaldo," said Martin. "And don't skirt details. Where buried gold is concerned exact details are bound to matter."

"I must work, don't you see?" Renaldo had his hands in the mud of fresh stucco making an extension on his house. "It is just a silly wives' tale." he said. "Go back home. You owe me money and now you take up my time as well."

"True I owe but you must concede that even an unlucky man may have his day -- then all will be well for him and his true friend."

"A chicken pecks one grain at a time, still it doesn't take long to finish. My patience is up. go away Martin."

Renaldo turned away and walked down the dirt road. A tender voice called him from behind. It was Renaldo's daughter. She ran up with a hot tortilla full of savory beans.

Martin accepted gratefully, but his mind was on business this morning. "Do you know about a golden light shining in the hills at night?"

"Yes, my grandmother tells me the story."

"Please then, my gentle one, tell me. For this morning I believe I have seen it glimmering before the sunrise. Sit here while I eat and tell me what you know. For my heart is the hungriest of all."

This is the story she told:

Long ago when the first settlers came they found they could not defend themselves well against enemy attack. So, a fort was built.

And as soldiers must fill a fort, soldiers must also be paid. The Colonel sent to the King for gold. When, one day, the gold finally came by wagon it was escorted by one hundred brave soldiers in arms. But before they reached the fort they spied a great host coming, the sworn enemies of the King, and riding hard up to meet them.

The Commander ordered a few men to get down and bury the gold before they all rode out to do battle. Only one little boy, the cook's own, stayed behind well hidden. That was a good call because none of the soldiers survived the terrible battle. When later the town's people heard of it they went out but the gold could not be found. The little boy claimed the soldiers' ghosts had come to claim it. The people believed the boy to have lost his sense.

Here Martin interrupted her. "But you are a reasonable child. Do you believe in this buried gold?"

"Yes," she said with great nods. "My grandfather once found it."

"Ah then your family must be very rich indeed."

She shook her head sadly. "No, my mother says we have little more than love and that it must be enough."

"But," pressed Martin. "what of your grandfather then?"

"The ghosts of the soldiers took the gold and hid it away again." Seeing in Martin's face this was not explanation enough she went on. "My grandfather saw in the hills one night a strange little light, like you. He followed it through the trees until at last he stood where the ground was swollen with a golden glow."

"He dug with his hands and found a coin. But he had come without something to dig with. Someone behind him said, "Here's a shovel."

He turned ready to thank the man. But it was the ghost of one of the soldiers, who faded away in a moment taking the shovel with him. Grandfather knew what happened then. Even the coin was gone, because the the ghosts instantly came and swept the treasure off somewhere. As they always will do whenever you look away."

"That is the secret!" Martin slapped a resolute fist into the palm of his other. "I will find this gold then and will remember you always."

With that he turned down the road, whistling a song -- an old song about a famous bull in Spain who loved to sniff flowers all day long.

That night Martin took no drink. Instead he took a shovel.

He set out at sundown toward the mountains. Guadalupe asked where he was bound and he replied: Out is the right way. He would trust like a swimmer gone to meet his ship. Out is the right way. That is all he could say.

She wondered if it was better to at least wait for the ship to appear before swimming out but Martin was gone and she knew he wouldn't have listened.

Martin wandered naturally in the direction of the Aspens on the mountain side where their leaves were turning yellow and red. When he reached them it had grown very dark and clouds obscured the moon. All was still has he climbed over fallen trunks and looked this way and that.

A visiting forest ranger (a very smart man) from the government once told him the Aspens were a very peculiar tree. A stand of them comprised a single living thing. In fact the oldest living things on earth were Aspens. Their root were often many times 10,000 years old, and this root fed all the Aspens of their order as one.

This thought pleased Martin as he walked among the white barked trunks. What might a man live in comparison, no matter how big his dreams -- seventy, eighty years? But 10,000 years or more? The number simply boggled his mind. What sweet dreams must feed the root of those trees.

The wind blew a hush and overhead the moon broke free from the clouds for a moment and then was gone. There was a twig snap, sharp and clear. Through the trees a distance yet was a glowing golden light. Martin squatted. He gripped his shovel before his breast and crept forward. Steadily he made way and to be sure he blinked only one eye at a time.

At last he came to the spot and stepped into the very center of it. The golden glow faded away, but Martin stood his ground. He set his shovel and began to dig. At close to six feet he struck something solid. Another strike of the shovel rung of something down there. And what was this? Something like a gold coin shone in the dirt. Martin restrained his heart and playfully began to whistle of the happy bull again slowly leaning down to touch the coin. To his surprise another whistle answered from above, an exclamation. Martin bolted upward. It was no ghost. Somebody above struck a match and applied it to a lantern. Martin stepped on the golden coin.

"Fie, why up so late Martin? You make people worry. What a deep hole."

"Ah, Renaldo. My friend. Why hold a gun on me?"

"This? I carry one for wildcats. The mountain belongs to them after dark. Some wanderers never return. But don't let me interrupt your work."

"I am tired. I hoped I had found the story gold but like you said it is only a silly wife's tale. A dream for fools. Nothing more."

"Maybe you should dig just a little more? Luck may turn yet."

Martin set the shovel aside and started to climb out of the hole.

"Ah, ah," said Renaldo, flicking the muzzle of his gun. "Please Martin, dig."

"We have known each other so long Reynaldo... we both have those that love us waiting at home..."

"I heard you strike something down there. Don't play games. Now dig, Martin."

"Hand me your light then Renaldo I feel something under my foot like a handle perhaps a lock."

"The lantern I keep. But look, the moon is coming out of the clouds, your luck has surely turned tonight."

Martin looked up and indeed the moon broke through ragged clouds. Now it was free, and the stars winked prettily. He wished. A wispy figure appeared behind Renaldo and smiled before fading away.

Renaldo looked down on Martin. "A better light you could not ask for. Now dig."

Martin returned the smile like a simple fellow. Before lifting the shovel again he moved his boot aside, slowly, fearfully. The golden coin was no more. He breathed out.

"Now I see it is only a root, no handle at all." He happily resumed digging and the top of the box resounded with a hollowness.

"The wood is rotted. Shall I break it open?"

"I would be most pleased."

Martin lifted his shovel high and rammed it down, several times. There was a crunch, there was a crack, and much prying until the lid gave way and the shovel head disappeared inside. Below it struck nothing substantial.

Renaldo became worried and tipped his lantern to throw more light below. There was nothing in the hole that returned his light. Martin continued to rip the lid until there was no doubt. The box was empty.

"Give your old friend a hand out. I am tired of this game, eh?"

Renaldo extended a hand to Martin and pulled him out. They stood for a time looking down into the hole. One laughed softly and the other said "Hooo!" Soon they headed down the mountain side.

Renaldo in later days told Martin never to speak of his debt again, as it did not exist. As for Martin, he too was a changed man people said.

He explained to Guadalupe though he sought gold he had found instead the root of the Aspens. And was it not a wonder connected like so (here he laced his fingers with hers and squeezed) that the forest was so old. Older than the greatest man on earth.

"Someday," said Martin. "when we are married in the soil, let our bones keep company with the Aspens."

"We are young yet!" cried Guadalupe.

END

