

The Limes

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I had taken to drawing limes ever since the Sunday my father announced his latest business scheme at Grandma Fina’s kitchen table. After my parents had retreated across the border to Matamoros, it was typically the only day of the week that I saw them and my little brother. I’d hoped my dad would toss the football around with me in the front yard, or take us out to Boca Chica Beach for a long, toasty afternoon of building sandcastles and pulling icy Coca-Cola bottles from his red Igloo chest, but instead he rambled incessantly about the incredible margin between the low cost of the limes he would purchase somewhere deep in the interior of Mexico and the exorbitant price they would bring at market in Dallas.

“That’s where the money’s at,” he exclaimed, scribbling unintelligible numbers on scattered napkins as the rest of us ate slowly, watching him with wide-eyed apprehension. “Dallas, te digo. The gringos up there are rolling in green. Oil money. Real estate development money. There’s even a Federal Reserve Bank there where they print money! They’ll pay top dollar at the market. That’s where all the big supermarket chains buy their produce.”

“Do you have a solid plan?” I asked, wary of his new venture given his track record of missteps.

“My plan is ‘a la brava’!” He yelped exuberantly as my mother and grandmother winced in dismay. ‘A la brava’ meant he was – yet again – boldly flying by the seat of his pants.

My long-suffering mom sat quietly to his side, spoon-feeding Ruben, who no longer fit in his high chair but was somehow still stuffed forcibly into it so that his uncoordinated body might be contained and protected from its own absence of equilibrium. I watched in disgust as he pointed at a bowl of ketchup. He couldn't speak yet, despite the fact most kids his age were already in second grade. But he could effectively point at the things he wanted, which created a lopsided family dynamic involving his complete self-absorption and everybody else's constant and herculean efforts to hastily respond to his ever-multiplying requests. Every couple of months he seemed to cycle through a random new obsession. He would point at the item and my parents would pour whatever meager resources they could marshal into procuring said substances or objects for him. Typically, at this age, his requests involved various types of food, although our family had recently survived his fleeting flirtation with batteries. My parents had been unable to ferry Ruben anywhere that might sell batteries, or he would point hungrily at them from his undersized stroller, his feet nearly dragging on the floor. Suspicious about how he managed to suck the life from so many batteries in so little time, I shadowed him one Sunday only to find him sneakily crawling to Grandma Fina's trash can to dispose of a brand new pair of double-A's. I'd hastily reported his abominable act, only to be chastised by my parents for picking on my disabled little brother. It was useless. So I drew limes.

As my father rhapsodized about the tangy green morsels, I watched Ruben open his mouth wide for spoons heaped with ketchup as I sketched circles in my spiral notebook.

“Does that count as a vegetable?” I asked, gesturing with my colored pencil towards the nearly vanquished bottle of Heinz at the center of the table.

“It’s made from tomatoes,” my mother answered, inserting another spoonful into Ruben’s expectant orifice.

I frowned, scrutinizing the ingredients on the label. “There are a bunch of other ingredients too. What’s high fructose corn syrup?”

“Limes are definitely not vegetables,” my father asserted. “They grow on trees. Only fruit grows on trees.”

Shrugging, I flipped the page and started a new sketch, this time quickly delineating a tree and populating its branches with limes surrounded by leaves shaped like dollar bills.

“How is school, Ramón?” My mother asked, as Grandma Fina paused her cooking to retrieve a fresh bottle of ketchup from the cupboard.

I couldn’t help but wonder how she felt about her cumin-infused picadillo tacos being smothered beneath a thick, sweet red blanket of gringo flavor instead of being enlivened by her homemade salsa de chile piquín. I watched her closely, but if she was in any way offended, she effectively concealed her feelings in deference to Ruben’s special needs.

“I’m still alive,” I replied dryly, but by then Ruben had begun fervently jabbing his finger towards the cucumber slices Grandma Fina set on the table and my mother forgot all about her question.

My father was visibly relieved by the distraction. It had been his dream to send me – at great sacrifice – to private school for the previous three years, but now – due to

his “cash flow” issues – I was nearly finished with my freshman year at Porter, which was widely considered one of the worst public schools in the country.

“Lime is good on cucumbers,” he added for good measure, dousing the cucumber slices with juice from his favorite new fruit. “It’s good in guacamole too.”

I gazed down at my sketch, deciding to support the sole lime tree with parents and siblings, an entire orchard of dysfunctional citric promise. Sadly, I no longer harbored much hope in my father’s entrepreneurial endeavors. Not now that his repeated failures had led to me boarding with my grandmother on the U.S. side of the border so I could legally attend public school.

Wincing at the acrid flavor of the lime juice that my father overzealously squeezed onto the cucumber, Ruben spit out a sticky ball of masticated green mush which rolled down his red-splattered shirt and plopped onto his high chair tray, its surface now resembling an abstract rendering of a crime scene.

I chuckled as he pointed decisively back at the gleaming new bottle of ketchup and grunted greedily.

“He didn’t like the lime juice,” my mother lamented.

“Some people have no taste,” I retorted, grinning down at the ever-growing orchard in my fertile notebook.

I didn’t look up from the page, but I could feel my parents’ eyes drilling into me with pointed disapproval.

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In Brownsville, it was rumored that the Porter Cowboys always won their football games because the players were cheered on by their wives and children. Fortunately, for me, during the first few weeks of school I was befriended by one of those Cowboys.

Dante, a burly behemoth with a full beard and moustache, was as an offensive lineman. And, contrary to the local stereotype, he assured me that he had never been married or fathered any children, at least not yet. In compliance, however, with another – more universal – high school trope, I served as Dante’s tutor, which was how we met, and he served as my bodyguard, which was how I survived.

“I’m used to protecting the smart guy,” he explained, referring to the team’s quarterback. “That’s what an offensive lineman does.”

“Oh, I thought maybe you all just went around insulting people and beating them up.”

“We do that too,” he replied, unaware that I was being sarcastic.

Although we were an odd pair, me of average height and scrawny, him soaring and muscle-bound, the combination proved effective in ensuring Dante could keep playing sports by passing his classes and I could survive my journey through the new world I’d been thrust into by my father’s financial misfortunes.

After school, during one of our tutoring sessions, we sat in the study hall. Dante hunched over a set of remedial math problems I had scrawled out for him as I worked on my sketches of the lime orchard where money grew on trees. Suddenly, I felt a presence over my shoulder. Turning, I was surprised to see a tall beanpole of a man crowned with floppy grey and white hair. It was Mr. Dean, the guidance counselor at our school.

“Hello, Mr. Lopez,” he said. It may have been the first time I’d been addressed in such a respectful manner. The nuns mostly spared me their words and struck me with the paddle, while the teachers at Porter generally ignored me on the off chance I might have brought more knowledge from private school than they’d gained at the community college where they earned their teaching certifications.

“Hello, Mr. Dean,” I replied.

“That’s a lovely sketch you’re making.”

“Thanks. They’re limes.”

His crystalline blue eyes scanned the sorry assortment of stubby colored pencils splayed out before me on the table. “Your palette seems somewhat limited. When you have a chance, come by my office.”

I smiled politely, nodded and returned to my work as he strolled away.

The following day, I visited his office during recess.

“Follow me,” he instructed.

Through the labyrinth of long, sterile hallways I still barely understood, he led me to a room I had yet to encounter. Inside were several easels supporting half-painted canvases. A long worktable was covered with containers of paint and cans stuffed with brushes of all sizes. The smell of turpentine seared my nostrils, summoning tears to my eyes. In the far corner of the room, a curly haired woman knelt on the floor. She appeared to be scrubbing the tiles, but as we approached it became clear she wielded a sponge to smear various shades of blue across a large sheet of butcher paper.

“This is Mrs. Martinez.”

Her curly head jerked upwards in surprise. She'd been so immersed in her craft that she hadn't even noticed us entering the room.

“Dios mio! Señor Dean, casi me da un infarto.”

“I'm not sure what an 'infarto' is, but I sincerely hope it's not what it sounds like,” he grinned mischievously.

When Mrs. Martinez rose to her feet, the top of her curls barely reached my shoulder. She was covered in blue paint, splotches of it on her face, splatters on her glasses, gobs in her hair. She looked like a Smurf, but there was only one female Smurf and she was blonde, unlike like Mrs. Martinez.

“It is much worse than what it sounds like, Señor Dean. An 'infarto' is a heart attack. You can't creep up on artists at work.”

“My most sincere apologies, Mrs. Martinez. I hope that my discovery atones for my transgression.”

She smirked at him. “I'm a painter, not a librarian, Señor Dean. Don't use those fancy words with me. What have you brought me that's worthy of disrupting my creative reverie?”

“This is Ramón Lopez,” Mr. Dean motioned towards me. “He came to us this year from St. Mary's. I'd like him to show you his sketches.”

“I see,” Mrs. Martinez lowered her purple horn-rimmed spectacles to the tip of her nose, peering curiously at me. “What a handsome young man. You are very neatly dressed. I bet you're smart and well ahead of many of your classmates given your previous schooling.

I nodded shyly, smiling, “Thank you. It's nice to meet you, ma'am.”

“Oh please, call me Marcela, m’ijo.” She patted me on the shoulder and fanned her sinewy arms, drawing my attention to the art supplies and colorful pictures lining the walls. “So, what do you think of all this?”

“It’s beautiful. I’ve really never seen anything like it.”

“Have you ever been in an art museum?” She asked.

“No, ma’am,” I hung my head. “I’ve never left Brownsville.”

She nodded slowly. “Most students here haven’t. That’s okay. That’s the wonder of art. It can take you places without you ever leaving the room, ever leaving your mind.”

Mr. Dean tiptoed towards the door, smiling and waving as he buzzed along to his next task.

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“What do you mean, ‘impounded’?” My dad’s troubled voice filtered through Grandma Fina’s house as he spoke on the phone. “I thought it was just a routine inspection.”

There was a pause as the person on the other end of the phone explained something to him.

When I entered the room I had to duck under the long, coiled, banana yellow phone cord, like when we played limbo at the nun’s school.

I sat in my usual chair in the corner, setting down the wooden palette and the thick pad of acrylic paper Señora Martinez had bestowed upon me like a fairy godmother.

“Several more days?” My father’s voice cracked. “Pero...the heat has been brutal. It was over 100 degrees today. The limes are just sitting out there in the sun... cooking.”

Now that I was in the same room, I could decipher some of the other person's words. He mentioned "customs being backed up" and not receiving "the usual advance notice of the shipment," and then something about a "customs broker."

"Customs broker?" My dad grimaced. "I can't afford a customs broker! Just do what you can. I'll be back there tomorrow."

When he returned the phone to its cradle on the wall, he found himself entangled in the cable. I stifled a snicker as I watched him struggle out of it.

"It's not funny, Ramón," he huffed, finally extricating himself from the maelstrom and sitting back down, his head slumped over his figures and calculations.

"Customs broker?" He muttered to himself.

I dipped my brush into one of the shades of green paint Mrs. Martinez had taught me how to mix and began applying color over the limes in my sketch.

"What's going on? Why are you even here?" I asked nonchalantly. "It's a week night. You're usually in Matamoros with Mom and Ruben."

"The limes have arrived and I had to use the phone. Calling from Mexico costs a fortune."

"When did the limes get here?"

"The truck came in from Yucatán two days ago. By now, it should be in Dallas at the market."

"Is it going to be okay?"

He looked at me, his hazel eyes momentarily betraying a trace of doubt. Then he regained his composure, resuming his steely countenance and obstinate confidence. "Of course, it will be fine. Ya veras. Mañana, we'll fix everything."

He gathered his papers and stepped outside, speaking in an animated fashion with my chain-smoking Uncle Nick beneath the shade of the avocado tree.

I observed them through the screen door. Even as dusk settled, the heat pressed in from outside. It was like staring into a broiling oven. I pictured the eighteen-wheeler sitting all day in a dirt lot by the old railroad bridge, its long wooden trailer packed full of hard green nuggets slowly but surely softening and yellowing. Nothing but a grimy tarp tethered to the top by fraying rope shielded my father's investment from the blistering inferno.

As the days crawled by torturously, my father's phone conversations became increasingly heated. There was talk of the shipment being sent back to Mexico. The words "total loss" were bandied about repeatedly. My dad's hair began to resemble a raven version of Albert Einstein's famously chaotic coif as he tugged at it in a futile effort to wring some brilliant idea from his exhausted brain to salvage his new business.

Eventually, a compromise was struck, thanks to the intercession of one of his childhood friends that worked at the border checkpoint. At my father's expense, the truck would be unloaded at a warehouse, where the limes would be sorted by hand, allowing only those still in tip-top condition to be reloaded and released from impound. In order to save money, our whole family, including my uncles and cousins, trudged to the warehouse, which must have been hotter than Hades, its corrugated metal roof and aluminum walls scalding to the touch. There, an endless cascade of limes rolled down a ramp from the trailer bed onto special manual sorting tables. I was confident I'd never seen so much of any one object in my entire life, nor would I ever again. Unfortunately,

most of the fruit was already rotten. Flies swarmed around us, a sickly stench filling the oppressively hot air.

When all was said and done, there were only enough good limes to fill the bed of my dad's rickety red pick-up truck, the heap rising precariously to the same height as the cabin.

"It's not worth it to drive them to Dallas," my dad bemoaned. "I'd spend more on gasoline than whatever they would fetch at wholesale."

As the spoiled limes were hauled away to the landfill and my mom and Grandma Fina headed home with calloused hands, I loitered by the pick up truck.

"I'm sorry, Joe," lamented the border agent who had helped my father salvage what he could. "Next time, I recommend you work with a customs broker and follow the protocols. A little planning can go a long way. Maybe even spring for a refrigerated truck."

During the tense ride back to my grandmother's house, all I heard from my dad were those same words echoed once and only once: "Refrigerated truck." He nodded pensively as he murmured them.

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The following day, when I came home from school, I was surprised to find my mother pounding graham crackers into smithereens on Grandma Fina's kitchen table. Cans of condensed milk and tubs of sour cream crowded the counter. My grandmother whisked ingredients vigorously in a bowl. Mesh sacks of my father's rescued limes lined the walls, some spilling out and rolling around rebelliously on the hardwood floors.

“What’s up?” I asked, acting as if – at this point – nothing could truly startle me.

“Your mamá had a good idea,” Grandma Fina said, using a silver lime press to squeeze juice into her bowl.

My mom demurred. “Oh, no. We came up with this together.”

“What is it?” I asked, saving a graham cracker from my mother’s threatening rolling pin and spiriting it into my mouth.

“We’re turning as many of your father’s limes as we can into pies,” Grandma Fina elucidated.

My abuela’s key lime pie was renowned within the family. It was always fresh, sweet and zingy, topped with a thick layer of her unequalled homemade meringue.

“We figured the limes can only be sold for a few pennies,” my mom said, “but the pies could go for several dollars.”

“That’s the smartest business idea I’ve heard in a very long time,” I surmised.

“But how will you sell them?”

“I already did,” Grandma Fina proudly proclaimed, whisking as if she had been robotically designed to do so. “I called my church group. I spoke to the Christian Lady’s Lunch Club. I phoned the head of the Neighborhood Watch.”

“We’ve got about 100 orders to fill,” my mother smiled, shooting me an unprecedented expression of self-satisfaction.

“That’s awesome,” I beamed. Who would have thought? After all of the misguided entrepreneurial efforts of the Lopez men – including my own brief stint as a chile powder dealer – it took the ladies to get it right. “So, where’s Dad?”

“He’s selling what he can on the highway out to the Island,” my mom answered.

This I had to see. Excusing myself, I rode my bike to the road leading out to South Padre. Sure enough, I spotted my dad's red truck parked at the corner of an empty field. It was a busy intersection, but he sat alone on the tailgate with the remainder of his limes. A crudely fashioned cardboard sign offered them at an ever-descending price. It had started out at ten cents a lime, then been crossed out and reduced to five cents. I considered buying a couple of bags and joining my mom and abuela in the kitchen.

The sun in his eyes, he didn't notice me from across the street, but I watched him for a long while, memorizing the haunting image. Then I pedaled home and spent the evening drawing the scene, envisioning it as a painting.

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At the school's yearend art show, Señora Martinez forced us "artists" to stand by our work and answer any questions that might arise. We spent the morning in the school gym, which felt oddly alien as it was, populated by easels displaying canvases and tables topped by sculptures. The rest of the students were compelled to parade through the aisles and appreciate the artistic efforts of their creatively inclined schoolmates. The judges also strolled slowly through the gymnasium, conferring imperiously and taking copious notes.

When a cluster of jocks swung by my still life of a talavera bowl filled with verdant limes, one of them grinned and snidely commented, "Nice, Lopez! You finally found your balls!"

The others broke out into laughter until Dante cleared his throat. "Hey, leave him alone. I like his limes. They look fresh and real."

I smiled gratefully at him as they shuffled sullenly along. I never would have taken Dante for an art connoisseur, but his critique came more naturally to him than his mathematical ability.

When Mr. Dean arrived at my easel, he lifted his hand to his chin and stared at the still life for a long time, assessing it from various angles. Then he leaned in close and examined how I had rendered the highlights and shadows, the tiny granular texture of the tough skins, the knobby brown bulbs at the tips, the sheen of the light illuminating them.

“This is good, Ramón,” he concluded. “You must have worked very diligently. This shows real skill.”

“I’ve learned a great deal from Mrs. Martinez,” I answered.

“Have the judges come by yet?”

“No. I’m a bit nervous. I heard they give brutally honest feedback.”

“This piece is very...safe,” Mr. Dean assured me. “I doubt they’ll find much fault with it.”

I nodded, sensing a tinge of disappointment in his voice. “Were you expecting something different?”

He hesitated, scratching the white stubble on his cheeks, knitting together his bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows. He resembled a human version of the loveable shaggy dog that starred in those movies about a canine D.A.

“Forgive me for spying, but I saw some of your other works in Señora Martinez’s studio. And, while I think this work is perfectly fine, I feel like some of the others were much more...insightful, powerful even.”

“Really?”

“One in particular stood out to me. A red pick up truck. A man sitting on the tailgate wearing a cowboy hat. A mountain of limes behind him under a brilliant sun...but what really got to me was the cardboard sign at his feet, the price was cut and still his limes baked.”

I stared at him, unsure which of the emotions swirling inside me should be allowed to supersede the others. Should I permit myself to feel fulfilled and exhilarated by his feedback, or should I wallow in the sorrow I felt for my muse?

“There’s still time,” I determined breathlessly, eyeing the judges one row away.

“I’ll hold down the fort,” he smiled, his eyes glimmering. “Go get it.”

I bolted past the metal doors, hurtling through the concrete maze. In Señora Martinez’s room, I pulled the painting from the storage shelves and hurried back.

As I entered the gym, the gaggle of judges was nearing my easel. Discretely, I swapped the paintings, handing Mr. Dean the still life.

“I’ll put this in the art studio,” he offered. “Good luck, Ramón.”

The judges stood before my painting for what seemed like an excruciating length of time. They didn’t say a word. They didn’t offer a shred of feedback. I was overwhelmed by a sense of dread. Should I have stuck with the safe choice? Had they been repulsed by my work?

At the end of the day, when the judges handed the principal a list of prizes and winners, the elderly Anglo man stepped up to the podium and counted down the various runners-up, handing out a slew of consolation prizes. I slumped as I watched others march proudly to the stage to claim their certificates. Nothing for me. Just another Lopez loser.

Then, finally, when the principal came to the Grand Prize for Best Painting, he had to say my name twice before I realized what was happening. The student next to me shook me by the shoulder and pointed towards the podium, urging me on.

In a daze, I received a golden trophy and a blue ribbon emblazoned with the number 1 as the audience applauded.

Mr. Dean was nowhere in sight, but Señora Martinez gleefully threw her arms around me, squeezing me tightly. She proclaimed, “This is the beginning of great things, Ramón!” She proceeded to tell me I could take the painting and easel home to display my accomplishment. A congratulatory throng of students and teachers formed around me.

Finally, as the crowd dissipated, Dante smiled smugly, reminding me, “I told them I liked your limes.”

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Grandma Fina insisted on displaying the painting in her small formal parlor. My Cousin David and I called it “The No-No Room,” because we were not permitted to sit on the furniture or touch the decor. The yellow sofa was shrouded in crunchy, transparent vinyl. The coffee table was adorned with plastic fruit. In the corner, dainty shelves displayed tiny porcelain figurines she’d collected over the years. And now, in front of those shelves stood the easel bearing my painting, the blue ribbon pinned to the top right corner.

“You wailed,” Cousin David slapped me on the back. “You nailed it.”

On Sunday when my parents and Ruben came for their weekly visit, they filed into the No-No Room to pay their respects. My mom spent her time trying to stop Ruben from knocking the easel over as he crawled beneath it, acting like it was a jungle gym brought in to amuse him. My dad, on the other hand, stared at it for a long time, and then – without a word – went out onto the back porch and sat in a rusted metal rocking chair. All through dinner, he remained taciturn. Afterwards, he went back outside and resumed his position in the rocking chair, swaying gently in the cooling evening breeze. After a while, I joined him, sitting in the rocking chair next to his, nervously waiting for him to dispense his wisdom, or his criticism. If I was lucky, perhaps he would say nothing at all about the painting.

“I didn’t know you liked to paint,” he began.

“I just started this year. But my teacher says I have promise.”

He nodded approvingly. “Promise is a good thing. This is the land of promise.”

I smiled as the shadows lengthened, the gnarled mesquites spreading spidery echoes of their branches across the sun-dappled grass.

“So you liked it?”

He took too long to answer, squinting at the mesquites, listening to the breeze whisper mysteriously through their blue-green spindly leaves, losing himself in the shadows and sound.

“It is sad,” he finally concluded.

After a long silence, the yard fell dark and the mesquites contorted into mournful, mangled ghosts on the lawn. Unsure what to say, I simply sat there, my innards twisting like the trunks of the trees.

When my mother called from inside that it was time to go, my father rose slowly and looked down at me with those dark yet glowing eyes of his.

“I am proud of you,” he said.

* * *

Grandma Fina and I stood on the driveway as they backed out, their red taillights fading into the night like twin fireflies. After I helped her clean up, we each retired to our rooms. Mine was atypically quiet as my Cousin David was spending the night at his other abuelita’s house. I lay there, staring at the dark ceiling, again wondering which of my conflicting feelings should be allowed to triumph. Happiness for winning at something? Guilt for doing so at my father’s expense? Excitement for finally finding something I might be good at, for having what Señora Martinez called “promise”? Or sorrow for the glaring reality that while my potential lay untapped, my father’s seemed drained. Amidst the swirl of confusing emotions, a darker – but clearer – force emerged at the center. Anger. I was livid at being in this position. Why couldn’t a much-needed victory be clean and neat? Why couldn’t everyone be happy just once? Why did my inspiration have to be interpreted as an insult? When Grandma Fina and my mom turned my father’s bitter lime juice into sweet key lime pies, the money had rolled in and everyone had been pleased. But, somehow, this was different. This was personal.

Enraged, I tore out of my bed and strode into the front room. I yanked the painting off the easel, blue ribbon and all, and I carried the whole lot into the backyard. At the dilapidated brick bar-b-cue pit, I smashed the easel over my knee, doused it with lighter

fluid, and struck a match. The flames rose vindictively into the night sky, sparks dancing around me. I took one last look at the painting and – in a gut-wrenching motion – flung it onto the pyre and watched it burn.