

The setting of the story is the three-day uprising in East Los Angeles that followed the 1970 Chicano Moratorium peace march against the Vietnam War, protesting that Latino young men were drafted and dying in disproportionate numbers. The descriptions of the events occurring at the march are all accurate, as the author witnessed them as a young participant.

Chicano Moratorium

Diane de Anda

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Celia and Luis had been sitting on the grass listening to the musicians on the makeshift stage and watching a group of children a few feet away laughing in a dancing circle when the first canisters made their popping sounds overhead. Pop, pop, pop in the distance and screams somewhere far behind them. Then suddenly it rolled into the afternoon calm, toward them like a great tidal wave, lunging toward the families and the groups of high school and college students quietly listening to the music. The distant buzz that vibrated through the air grew louder and transformed into the yelling, screaming, swearing voices of hundreds of people. The ground beneath them thundered with the footfalls of the fleeing demonstrators covered in swirls of the caustic fog. Someone dashed out of a pickup truck and scooped up the group of children, lifting and prodding them into the open truck bed, and then drove away. Families leapt to their feet and pushed forward, lifting the youngest and putting their arms around the *viejitos*.¹

Celia stood dumbfounded by the suddenness of the movement around her, her mouth agape as her senses were assaulted by the smoke and sounds and the air vibrating with the panic of the fleeing people. Luis grabbed her hand, "Shit! Let's make a run for the car--it's close." He snapped her forward, and they began to run, to push to outrun the wave that was rolling towards them. Everyone pressed forward toward the street, gasping and calling to each other as they ran in straight and zigzag lines across the grass.

Luis had parked his car at the curb only a few feet from where they were sitting, so they reached the car and locked themselves away from the crowd in just a few minutes. Twenty seconds after Luis pulled away from the curb, the wave crashed onto the edge of the park and into the street. Through the windshield, the amorphous masse and ominous sounds became a multitude of screaming terror-stricken and angry faces. Their pursuers with hurling canisters and flying clubs swarmed over them like giant horror movie insects, their gas masks fierce protruding mandibles, their riot helmets hard-

¹ old folks, elderly

shelled impenetrable heads.

As they edged their way through the tangle of people and cars, Celia saw bus after bus filled with deputies encased in riot gear converging on the area from all sides. Busloads pushing towards the park, busloads hidden in the side streets waiting for the signal to teach the people that they could not choose to say "*Basta*."²

Luis threaded his car slowly through the crowd into the traffic that was now moving erratically around them. One of the Brown Berets moved into the center of the street and started directing traffic, holding it back to let fleeing groups cross the intersection. A sheriff's car swept down the boulevard behind him. The sheriff on the passenger side rolled down his window and drew his billy club in a stinging rap across the young man's back, sending him flying forward onto his knees and the heels of his hands. Anonymous hands reached out of the crowd and lifted him to his feet. With the windows rolled up Celia could only feel the invective that poured from the young man's lips as he flailed his arms and spit epithets after the slow moving sheriff's car. And then he ran over to a trash bin at a construction site by the side of the road and picked up a worn three-foot long two-by-four. He spun around and raced behind the sheriff's vehicle, and as it was stopped by the crush of people in the street ahead of it, he swung the board with the force of his two decades of *coraje*³ into the rear window. The window exploded, its scream absorbed into the din of voices around it. And the crowd enfolded the young man into its anonymous embrace.

Luis turned quickly into a side street that led directly onto a freeway on-ramp and sped away from the chaos behind them. It was strange to be moving so swiftly and peacefully on the freeway, the rest of the city oblivious to the pain and fury escalating in the streets of East L. A. Celia flipped on the radio, the news stations breaking through with bulletins from fast-talking on-the-scene reporters relating events in their out-of-breath style.

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Celia's cousin Marisa had been getting ready to go to work when she first heard the bulletins on the radio. She had just twisted her long, dark hair into a knot near the top of her head when the sound of sirens and shouting filled the room. She moved closer to the radio as though this would make the incomprehensible more comprehensible. Her dark hair fell across her shoulders as she became transfixed by the sounds and descriptions of the scene being broadcast in fragmented and mounting intensity. Her petite five foot two frame became taut as she pictured her cousin Celia in the midst of the escalating events.

The ringing telephone pulled her away from these images only to hear the terror

² Enough--implies it must stop; used to indicate will not tolerate any more

³ a word for which there is no direct translation, indicating a strong, passionate mix of emotions of anger and psychological pain

vibrating in her aunt's voice as she asked if Celia were home yet. Her aunt's voice touched a synchronous chord; a suffocating swell began to build in her chest. It was now that her nurse's training, that the years of steeling herself for the patient's sake took hold.

"*Tía, tía, cálmate.*"⁴ I'm sure she'll be here soon. I promise I'll have her call you the minute she walks in the door."

Despite Marisa's reassurances and her confident and compassionate tones, her aunt began to cry softly into the telephone. "*Gracias, hija, gracias,*"⁵ she managed between breaths, then hung up.

Marisa quickly twisted and pinned her hair in place then hurried to the front window where she could see the carport entrance and the street in front of the apartment building. She had been pacing back and forth for twenty minutes in front of the window when they arrived.

Marisa met them at the open door. The cousins embraced each other, holding each other in the still, quiet assurances of two decades of *abrazos*⁶, Marisa with her long, dark shiny hair and dark eyes and Celia with her short curly hair and eyes both the color of root beer.

"Celia, thank God! I was scared to death. You'd better call your house right away; your mom called here panicked out of her mind."

Luis flipped on the television while Celia quickly called her parents to let them know she was home safe away from the melee. It was only after she had finished reassuring her mother with forced, even tones and hung up the phone that she noticed the shaking feelings building within her. It was only as she watched the television cameras scanning the streets overflowing with the frightened running from their armor-clad pursuers and the angry hurling rocks, bottles, and profanity that she broke down into body-racking sobs.

"This was a Peace March! This was a Peace March!" she shouted at the television. Marisa walked over and tightly clasped one of Celia's hands. The two stood together staring motionlessly at the television screen for a few minutes, lines of liquid black mascara cutting dark tracks across their cheeks.

Luis paced back and forth in front of the television, kicking the rug and swearing. "They make a fucking war out of everything, everything! Goddamn pigs... *brutos... cabrones*⁷...fucking pigs!" Luis' voice rose and fell, swearing in a chorus of English and Spanish. After a few minutes, he turned towards the two young women. "Look, I can't

⁴ "Aunt, aunt, calm yourself. (calm down)

⁵ "Thank you, daughter, thank you," Daughter is not meant literally, but as an expression of closeness between relatives.

⁶ Warm embraces, a common greeting to indicate closeness or welcome in Latino culture

⁷ beasts...bastards

just stand around. I gotta split and see what I can do."

Celia and Marisa gasped in unison, the sudden fear they felt momentarily stealing their tears. Their voices blended and clashed with one another. "No, Luis, you can't." "Luis, are you crazy?" "Luis, don't go; please, Luis, there's nothing you can do. Just look at the TV, Luis—there's nothing anyone can do!"

"Maybe not, but I can get in a few *chingazos*.⁸ Don't worry, I know how to take care of myself."

Luis sped out the apartment door as the two women began to move toward him, their entreaties rising in pitch and desperation. Luis' lithe, dark frame loped easily over the banister. He moved with long strides across the carport and eased into his black Chevy Bel Air. He moved with the grace and ease of the track star he was. Celia stood still, overwhelmed by images of his graceful form caught in the thundering, graceless crush.

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For hours Celia and Marisa sat mesmerized, disbelieving the reality that reeled across the television screen. These were the same streets where a few hours before thousands had marched in ordered, peaceful solidarity. Only the sporadic chanting had touched the pain and rancor that rode silent and electric through the crowd: the old, the young, shoulder to shoulder marching to say, "*Basta! Basta!*" Now the fires that raged silently so long in the bellies and hearts of the people burned uncontrolled in the streets. *Coraje* poured into the streets of East L.A.; *coraje* thundered in the air, thick, bilious, palpable.

Marisa made a pot of *yerba buena*⁹ tea and placed it on the table between them. The aroma of mint wafted up to them offering the healing images of their childhood elixir. They wrapped their hands around the cups, savoring the calming warmth.

Celia had already turned down the volume for some respite from the loud, rapid-fire reporting that monopolized the airwaves. Her eyes focused past the television set, staring unseeing into the far corner of the room. "Before he left, Rudy told me he knew he was going to die." The words dropped slow and weighted from Celia's lips.

"Are you serious? When?" Marisa leaned forward meeting her cousin's eyes as she turned toward her.

"It was at his wedding reception, you know, about a month before he left for Vietnam, when all the relatives went back to our *tios*¹⁰ house. You remember, there were people all over the place talking and laughing. I watched him move around the crowd for a while, shaking hands and giving *abrazos*.¹¹ But there was something

⁸ Street-language term of profanity referring to physically aggressive acts against another.

⁹ Mint plant (leaves) used for making tea

¹⁰ Aunt and uncle's

¹¹ Hugs--a warm embrace given as a form of greeting

different about him--not just his GI haircut and uniform. It was something in his eyes, a sort of stillness, even when he smiled."

Marissa knew Celia and Rudy talked alone together for hours, about the future, about the poetry they both wrote.

"Then what happened, Celia? How did he tell you?" Marisa felt uncomfortable asking Celia, but felt somehow the information belonged to her too.

"He just came over to me and asked me if we could go up to his bedroom and talk for a while. When we got there he pulled out the folder with all his poetry and handed it to me. He asked me to read the new poem he had written called 'Epitaph,' about a young soldier going away to war and...." Celia hesitated as her voice began to break. "Then he told me that he was the soldier and that's what he knew was going to happen."

Marisa leaned forward, "Was that the poem they read at the funeral?"

Celia slowly nodded yes in reply.

"God, Celia, what did you say to him then?"

"No matter how hard I try, I can't remember exactly what I said to him; I just remember telling myself over and over that he shouldn't leave with that picture of death in his mind." Celia put her elbows on the table and leaned her face into her cupped hands, her palms covering her mouth as the tears rolled a slow, steady stream down the sides of her face.

Marisa reached across the table.

"I begged him," Celia cried. "'Take just four more units and you'll be full time and II-S.' He just said, 'I need one more semester to pay off my car and have enough money saved up to work only part time. I can't live with my parents and give back nothing,' then he refused to talk about the draft anymore."

They sat quietly together for a time in an unspoken agreement to let Rudy have the last word. Marisa closed her eyes and let the scent of mint spread its aromatic balm each time she brought the cup to her lips. But Celia kept her cup trapped in a woven nest of fingers pulled taut against the glazed surface. Bits of tea leaves rose and fell with the shifting pressure of her hands as she sifted through the barrage of images that continued to bombard her. Faces and moving bodies, unrelated strands, began to weave themselves into a single fabric: The dark line of vehicles in the funeral cortege winding slowing through the curving cemetery streets in the brutally beautiful sunshine of a golden California day; the crowd marching in unison today across the broad boulevard in the blazing white August sun, then stampeding beneath the flying batons and suddenly gray and burning sky above them; she and her classmates pressing forward, their gowns and tassels ruffled by a welcome breeze on a mild summer afternoon. A sense of complicity gnawed at Celia, of security rationed by gender and class.

"I'd better get going," Marisa interjected, eager to push herself back into the present. She stood up and moved away from the table. "My shift starts in half an hour."

Celia started to rise in response.

"No, Celia, stay here and finish your tea. I'll lock the door behind me," Marisa insisted, placing her hand on Celia's shoulder.

Celia patted her cousin's hand, "Be careful on the road; everything's crazy out there tonight."

Marisa was about to remind Celia that the hospital was on the Westside of the city almost twenty miles from what was going on in the streets of East L.A. She hesitated. "Sure, I'll tell my mom to give you a call when I talk to her tonight." She moved silently across the floor on the white rubber soles of her nurses' shoes, picked up her purse and keys from the coffee table in the front room, and quietly slipped out the door.

Celia raised the cup to her lips as she heard the deadbolt clicking into place. She tipped the cup to savor the last inch of the pale yellow-green liquid, but the tea, now cold and concentrated, rode bitter across her tongue. Celia put the cup down and began to look about the room. She felt exhausted, but was still too agitated to lie down and rest. She stood up, walked over to the television set and began to flip the channels. Angry faces in dark and lighter grays called out to her from every channel, blurring as they swept across the screen on the small black and white portable television. The cameras zoomed toward and away from the crowds, chased the speeding squad cars, and studied the phalanxes of armored deputies sweeping groups down the boulevard. The word, "escalating," leapt out several times in the snatches of narratives across the moving channels. But no one talked about the loaded buses she had seen lying in ambush.

Celia turned off the television and stood back. She crossed her arms across her chest and reeled her own images across the blank screen: her older cousin standing next to her husband's coffin holding onto the hands of their two boys, waiting for help to lift them up to say farewell to their father in dress uniform, the brown face they knew hidden beneath a mask of pale powder.

The screen reflected her own image back at her, a slim, dark figure standing at the foot of Rudy's grave as two soldiers lifted the large American flag off the top of the coffin. With practiced precision they performed the ritual they had been sent to complete, folding the flag into a neatly tucked wedge. With clean, even strides they walked up to Rudy's parents and stiffly placed the flag in his mother's arms. Her aunt pulled her arms up, crushing the flag against her chest as she rocked back and forth in slow rolling moans, her husband's hand on her leg as he wept hunched over in the hard, metal chair.

The ring of the telephone pulled her back into the present. Her father spoke in deep, urgent tones, "I talked to your *tía*. Marisa called from the hospital and told her

¹² A contraction of two words expressing endearment: "mi" meaning *my* and "hija" meaning *daughter*.

mom about Luis." He hesitated. "Mi'ja,¹² you're not thinking about joining him out there on the street..." Celia interrupted, "Why would I go? Nothing makes sense out there."

Satisfied that his daughter was in no danger, he bid her goodnight and hung up the phone. But his voice had triggered another memory--that gray morning three years ago when her father yelled up the stairs to Celia and her sister who sat in the stairwell shaken out of their sleep by the 5:00 a.m. phone call. "They killed Rudy!" His words rang out, bouncing off the narrow walls in echoing unreality. "They killed Rudy!" "They, they." The echoes returned, racing images in migraine neon through her consciousness. "They killed Rudy!" A sea of faceless generals loomed before her. "They killed Rudy!" The sea parted, revealing a steel-eyed, craggy-faced Johnson. "They killed Rudy!" She lunged toward Johnson's image, lifted a gun to his head, and let it shatter like a ripe watermelon crashing onto the burning summer asphalt. "They killed Rudy!" "They, they." The images dissolved, and Celia stood frozen before the darkened screen. "We, we, who let him go."

She curled her fingers until the nails cut into the palms of her hands and locked her jaw as the tears began to wind down her face. The tears rode in biting streams across her lips. She had tasted these tears before. They had washed across her face in hot and relentless waves as she watched the Dallas motorcade ride again and again across the screen. With deep, vibrating breaths, Celia opened herself to these images, drawing herself back to that Friday afternoon nearly seven years before. She lifted her face and dug her feet into the carpet. Standing there, transcending time, she took back her tears and claimed them for Rudy.

(In memory of my cousin, Terry Enriquez, 1945-1967)