

On the Buffalo

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Houston is a cruel, crazy town on a filthy river in east Texas with no zoning laws and a culture of sex, money, and violence. It's a shabby, sprawling metropolis ruled by brazen women, crooked cops and super-rich pansexual cowboys who live by the code of the west – which can mean just about anything you need it to mean, in a pinch.”

-Hunter S. Thompson

Jose had heard the story many times. The one where he tried to take a bite of a watermelon like an apple, because she was taking too long to cut it. His mother was telling it this time to her new friends from church. The ones that would squeeze his cheeks when they arrived at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, down the street from where they lived. He thought it was strange to see them in normal clothes. He had imagined that they always wore nice clothes like the one's they did to church. When they finally left it was getting late and each of them rubbed his cheeks one more time as they made their way out the door. He liked how the new friends made his mom smile and laugh. The same way she would back when they were at home. His family was new to the area, and his mother was so excited when she found a Catholic Church that held service in Spanish. She told Jose to be thankful that they had found it. She assured him that it was a blessing, a piece of home.

But home was far away and Jose missed it. He thought of their old home in the streets of Matamoros. Where he would wake up to the smell of tacos being made with fresh tortillas out on the street. Where he would go through town with his mother and they would pick out ingredients for dinner that night. It was the only place he had known. Now, things were different. His father was gone all day and even night, working. Jose knew they had come for work, but he had no idea it meant *this* much work. Jose's father found a job at the port loading and unloading cargo from the ships that came in through the Gulf. “Ships that come from the other side of the world,” Jose's father would tell him. He tried to imagine the other side of the world and decided that it probably looked much different than the one here. He imagined how over there his father wouldn't be gone all day. How his mother would have plenty of beans, enough for two scoops.

Now he had to go to school. He hated school. Everybody spoke English, which he couldn't fully understand. Some of the white kids also made fun of his shoes. They were beginning to split at his big toe on each foot. “Big toe” was now quickly becoming his new nickname. Every time he told his mother that he wasn't going to go back she assured him, “not unless I'm dead you're not.” She wanted Jose to get an education, but worried that he would forget Spanish if kept learning only English in school. His favorite part of the day however was when he got home and his mother would surprise him with a small meal. It was supposed to be a snack with just tortillas and beans, but Jose ate it like he wasn't sure when the next meal would be. He thought the tortillas weren't as good here as the ones back home. These were more thin and tasted like chalk. He mentioned it to his mother, but she reminded him to be

thankful for others in the neighborhood had less. Jose knew what she meant, but didn't believe her.

On most days, Jose would wait for his dad to get home from work, but more than often he was beat by the weight of sleep. It depended on the number of ships that came in. When Jose finally succumbed to his heavy eyes, his mother picked him up and carried him to the room that they all shared. The cot in one corner and the bed occupying the other. Once he was comfortably asleep, Jose's mother stayed up till Pedro got home. She knew he would be tired and hungry. She was worried if she made enough food to fill him. When he finally walked through the door right before midnight he stopped, looked at her and took a deep breath. She got up and walked over to him slowly. His slumped shoulders fell into hers, the same way Jose's did sometimes.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, as they walked towards the small fire lit stove to heat up the rice, beans and tortillas.

"Yes," he muttered, "how's Jose?"

"Asleep. He was waiting for you"

Pedro watched her as she made him a plate. He thought back to how nervous she was when she first arrived in the new town. He had finally saved up enough money for a home for the three of them. It was a small shack on the east side of town. He was nervous too, not sure if it would all be enough. She and Jose got there late at night, tired from the long journey from Matamoros to Houston. Her hair was undone and her eyes bloodshot from the sun. Jose was half-asleep and he picked him up as they walked around the house. He showed them the bedroom where they would all be together and she began to cry and he knew it would be enough.

"He needs some new shoes." She said

"Why?"

"His toes are starting to poke out"

"They're too small?"

She turned around and looked at him, "Yes," she said sarcastically.

"Well, we'll get some as soon as we can."

She brought him the warm plate and sat down next to him at the round wooden table underneath the small framed picture of Mother Mary on the wall. She watched him chew slowly. She was feeling tired and laid her head on his shoulder. His shirt smelled like sea air and sweat. She closed her eyes and drifted into a light sleep.

"Isabel," he said, quietly. "Isabel," this time a little more firm.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. He gave her a sharp smirk and hugged her again. "Let's go," he said, as they both walked side by side to the dark room where Jose was in a deep sleep.

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Mr. Gibbs sat in the light blue rocking chair on his porch. Rocking back and forth on his right foot. The paint had chipped and worn off parts of the chair where it had grown used to Mr. Gibbs' old body resting. He was watching the street intently, waiting for something to work his nerves. Men would pass by and tip their hats and women would wave politely. But Mr. Gibbs would stare right on past them at some intense frustration that had yet to be found. The morning was humid and sticky. The beginning to the kind of day that Mr. Gibbs had grown used to, but still disliked.

*The heat drives the people crazy,* he thought to himself. *If it weren't so damn hot, things might have a chance around here.* On the northwest side of downtown it was the beginning of another normal September day. The businessmen were on their way into downtown with their heavy wool suits topped with a matching fedora. While the blue collar, railroad workers walked in the other direction in their boots and heavily patched overalls. The two outfits of labor amused Mr. Gibbs. He retired from where he had worked a few years ago because of a stroke that left his whole left-side with paralysis. His lip drooped uneven, giving him a constant grimace. Confined to his home now, he spent most of his time on the porch, where he felt less caged.

Ms. Pierre would be there soon to take care of him for the day. She lived further North in fourth ward, near Freedmen's town. She always ran a little late because of her children. "I had five too many," she would joke sometimes to Mr. Gibbs. She made sure they all made it to school on time. That was her first priority and this occasionally caused her tardiness. She settled up in a little area where most of the other Creoles lived. Her family of seven quickly turned to six when her husband left not long after they got to Houston. He was the one who originally wanted to come, Ms. Pierre would remind herself. Now he was the first to go. They were all originally from Louisiana, outside of the Baton Rouge area. They had a small piece of land, but no money. Mr. Pierre was the first to come and he worked on the railroad for a period of time, but eventually that railroad was the temptation that made him leave.

She would often say that he left once he realized that he only made enough to feed three. He wanted some of the kids to work and she refused. Now the burden was all hers. After making sure all five were fed, her next goal was to make sure the children all got an education. She was betting every struggle she had on the hope that education would pay off for her children. When her feet hurt from walking, she thought of her children learning new words.

When her back hurt, she thought of them at school learning skills she and Otis never had. It was the hope that drove her motivation.

Ms. Pierre had met Mr. Gibbs' wife through the church and they had a relationship that consisted mostly of Mrs. Gibbs being a source of charity for Ms. Pierre and her children. That charity continued even after she passed and couldn't care for Mr. Gibbs anymore. She wanted Ms. Pierre to do so, she trusted her, knew she could use the money, and knew Mr. Gibbs had the money. The money was good too, so good that Ms. Pierre would pray that the old man lived till the kids got through school and found secure jobs of their own.

She was planning to make Mr. Gibbs some jambalaya. She knew he had never had anything like it before. She was excited to introduce him to her culture and knew that whatever he didn't eat would keep for dinner at her house. As she arrived, she waved, "How are you today Mr. Gibbs?"

He grunted, paused, then sighed. She stopped and put her hands on her hips waiting for a useful answer. "Fine," he mumbled out of the right side.

She smiled, "Good!" Both of them knowing she would not have accepted any negative answer. They went inside together and he sat in his chair and opened up the day's paper. While she went into the kitchen to prepare the ingredients for lunch. She lit the stove and began throwing rice and sliced pieces of sausage, chicken and shrimp into the large pot. Followed by chopped vegetables and peppery spices. As she did this, she began to sing some slow French song as she cooked. Mr. Gibbs had heard her sing it before, but still could not understand it. It sounded sad, but he enjoyed her voice and found enough meaning in that.

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It was after school and Jose was playing in the street with friends from the neighborhood. They were allowed to play until it got dark. Once it was dark Jose' knew the pachuco's came out. His mother told him stories of how pachuco's would roam the night and take little boys away. The other kids with older brothers said it wasn't true, but Jose was far too frightened to be swayed. Him and his friends would get broken broomsticks and bottle caps from around the neighborhood to play baseball with. The pitcher would throw the bottle cap which would curve in unpredictable directions as the batter desperately tried to make contact swinging the narrow broomstick. If you had fast enough eyes you could hit it.

It was getting dark and Jose knew it was time to head home. When he got there his mother was waiting with dinner, but he wasn't hungry.

"What is wrong?" She asked.

"I don't know. I have a headache."

She looked at him concerned. "You're probably just tired" she said, "go lay down for awhile and rest." He shook his head and walked toward the room. She covered the food to keep it warm for later. She waited for Pedro to come home. He told her earlier that he wouldn't be late, so she was excited. It had been a long time since they had evening together. They didn't got to spend much time with each other anymore. Back in Mexico they would often go and listen to bands on the corner play and they would dance together. She hadn't danced in a long time.

Pedro knocked on the door and she got up to unlock it. He walked in and gave her a kiss. "How are you darling?" he said while holding her.

"Good, how was work?"

He shrugged, "where's Jose?"

"He said he wasn't feeling well, so he went to lay down."

"What was wrong?"

"He said his head hurt"

"He's probably just tired"

"That's what I thought too" she said. She got up to go check on him now. As she walked into the room she navigated her way through the dark to find his head resting on the cot. She placed her hand on his forehead and felt the warm skin. She switched to the neck which was lightly sweating. She rolled the blanket off him and put it on their bed and walked back out.

"It feels like he has a fever" she said, concerned.

He looked at her and could see a bit of worry now growing in her eyes. Consumption had been going through the neighborhood and they both knew of people who had been sick. Some even died. "Well, it is a little warm in here." He managed to say.

"Yeah, it is." She was trying to convince herself, but concern was now taking over. Father Gonzalez at the Church was asking everyone to pray for those who were sick just a few days ago. She knew something bad was going around. "Do you know of any doctors?"

He paused and thought, "No." He said. "Don't worry, everything is fine, don't fear the worst. You always fear the worst." Pedro was now worried he was going to have to convince himself of this too. He knew that a few of the men he worked with had sick family members. It was going around through the neighborhood like a fire. One of the workers told him it started by feeling tired and by the time you had a cough with blood, it was too late.

Pedro got up to go check on Jose himself. "Where are you going?" Isabel asked. He didn't answer he walked quietly into the room where Jose was laying still. He felt his forehead with the back of his hand. He could feel the warm skin. He took his hand off and thought. He went back out into the room where Isabel was and sat back down as she tried to read his face for a sign.

"Are you worried?" She asked.

"No." He said quickly. "Everything is fine"

Pedro didn't eat much and they waited for Jose to wake up.

"He's been asleep a long time." She said.

"He's fine, let him rest" he put his hand around her shoulder trying to steal the worry.

As they went to bed they each checked on him again before laying down. Isabel still had the look in her eyes that Jose had seen before.

"If he's not feeling better by tomorrow, I'll see if there's a doctor." He kissed her on the forehead and turned around to sleep. But she didn't sleep well. Worry ran through her mind. The more she thought about it the more she realized how many people in the community were sick. How many people the church was saying were in need of prayer.

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The sizzle from the pot filled up the house with a smell that it had never had before. Mr. Gibbs was reading the paper, distracted now by the powerful fragrance that was occupying his nose. He grabbed his wooden cane and raised himself to walk into the kitchen. Ms. Pierre was shuffling her weight back and forth on each foot, swaying from side to side as she stirred with one hand and rested the other on her hip. A force of steam was rising from the stove as she flicked her wrist.

She turned around to meet his stare. "You know I have eyes in the back on my head, Mr. Gibbs." She had felt his presence. It was a talent that was only gained by the constant company of needy children following her. He shook his head, casting some sense of approval. "It will be done soon enough." She added. He went back into the main room and sat down and thought about his wife. He missed her. He missed how they would sit together in the room and read the paper. He missed her singing. When Ms. Pierre sang it made him think of her singing. When she cooked it made him think of her cooking. Her absence was a weight that he had never known. One that was hard to shake.

Ms. Pierre knew that he was struggling in life without her, but she also did not bother to console him. She knew nothing could be done, but time. *Soon enough*, she thought, *soon enough that man's troubles will be healed*. She had enough to worry about herself. She worried about her children. She knew they had no choice but to go to school and make something of themselves. She was in charge of that. But, she worried about them getting along in the new home. She knew they missed Louisiana, because she did too. Here they were having trouble with the other Black kids in the neighborhood. They made fun of how they spoke. They weren't

accepted by the whites either. This came as no surprise to her. But she didn't anticipate a struggle from the others.

She reminded her children to be proud of where they came from. "Your culture is strong." She would tell them, "Be proud of that." She turned off the stovetop and scooped a portion of the mix into a bowl from the cupboard. Then covered the pot with a heavy lid. Mr. Gibbs was still reading the paper in the main room. She put the bowl on the table and walked quickly over to him and offered him a hand.

"Come on Mr. Gibbs, you're gonna like this." She said slowly.

He grunted and grabbed her hand which lifted him to his feet. He reached for his cane and she pulled out his chair at the table for him to sit. Once he did, she sat down next to him excited for the exhibition about to take place. He studied the bowl and its contents. Shoveling his fork through the orange mud, rearranging some pieces.

"Don't play with your food now, Mr. Gibbs."

He chuckled a bit and then lifted the fork into his mouth. She watched his face, waiting for any indication.

"What is this?" He asked.

She sang, "It's called culture, Mr. Gibbs"

"It's spicy." He chewed some more.

"That's the way it's supposed to be." She said proudly

"Oh that culture's spicy."

"I know you like it, Mr. Gibbs." She could see the right side of his face working to show some sense of delight. It struggled, but she knew he wasn't going to be the first person that didn't like her jambalaya. "Old family recipe," she added, "been in our family 'bout as long as you been alive."

He looked at her accusingly. He kept eating. Slowly. Studying the seasoned chunks on his fork. "I recognize some of this."

"You're Creole now, Mr. Gibbs."

He thought of Annie and how she would be amazed to see him trying something new. He was a man of routine and this definitely broke it. He did like it too. *It's too late to be liking new things* he said to himself.

As Ms. Pierre got ready to leave she packed up the leftovers from her pot into a casserole dish. Leaving some for Mr. Gibbs, just in case he wanted more for himself. He had went down for a nap and told her not to wait on him to leave. She got all of her stuff and headed out the door making the journey back home. As she walked, none of the men tipped their caps and none of the women politely waved as she passed. But she kept on steadily,



staring straight ahead with a soft smile. Imagining the day when her children were grown, happy and successful, and everyone knew how good her jambalaya was.

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They woke up to Jose coughing. It was a violent force that shook his chest. Isabel got up and went to sit down by him. Watching him breath slowly in a half sleep. He opened his eyes and looked at her, wincing.

"How are you feeling" she asked nervously.

"It feels like there's something in my chest." He croaked.

"What do you mean?"

"It hurts," he winced again.

She leaned over to feel his head, it was still warm. Her fears were feeling a sense of validation all too fast and she felt a wave of anxious heat rush over her body. She got up and went into the kitchen and poured a cup of water. She went back into the room and put it up to his mouth to drink. Pedro snoring in the background like a bear.

"Try and rest some more" He turned over on the other side and coughed again into his arm. She stood up, her knees feeling weak and laid back down in bed, but it didn't help.

Pedro woke up an hour later to find her balled up watching him. He assured her everything would be okay and that he had to go down to the port.

"Promise me you will try to find a doctor to check on him." She begged him as he left.

"I promise" he assured her. "Don't worry, he will be alright." He looked at her tense shoulders and dark eyes. Over night she turned into a shell of the woman from the day before. She waited all day for Pedro to come home, listening to Jose cough violently on the other side of the thin wall. Frequently going into check on him and give him more water. He wouldn't eat. Saying that he didn't feel hungry at every offer she made. Which worried her even more. By the time Pedro got home she wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or not.

"How is he?" He asked, steadily.

"Not any better" she said with a shiver. "Were you able to find a doctor?"

"Not yet"

"He needs one." She begged.

"I know, be patient. Pray."

She shook her head. "Is it money?"

He looked at her confused, "No," he paused, she waited, "What are you saying?"

"I don't know."

"Look, there's no doctors that can see him right now. I'll keep asking around." He looked at her, "I promise."

"Why don't we take him to a hospital?"

"They won't see him. You know that."

Her expression deepened in agony. She knew it, but him confirming it made her feel a sharp sense of doom that twisted her stomach. Pedro pulled her closer to him and hugged her tight.

"Let's pray."