

Showers

by Fabiana Elisa Martínez

The clinking of the cheap saucer on the marble brought Alberto back to the serene pace of the old café, the aroma of ground beans, and the patina of time over the immutable surfaces. His tired eyes had been fixed on the entrance of the school building across the street through the slightly wavy glass and the filigree backward letters that still read, as they had five decades ago, *Café Sol de Lima*. Only the natives know that the sun is a miracle in Lima. Sky of Lead would have been a more accurate name.

“We don’t have any cognac, *Señor*.” The aged waiter paused respectfully until Alberto’s blue irises met his own. “May I offer you a glass of our best pisco?” After some hesitation, he added, “To tell you the truth, we have a vintage bottle of a local brandy, but I imagine that Peruvian cognac was not exactly what you had in mind.”

“Yes,” Alberto’s voice stumbled without reason. “Pisco will be fine. Thank you for your... perspicacity.” The server nodded and turned away promptly with an enigmatic grin.

Alberto’s look returned to the window, his eyelids narrowing over some sudden drops of silent rain, straining for the detection of a known face among the various figures of respectful men entering the school chapel through a smaller lateral door. Most of the men were old, enveloped in expensive black suits that echoed the ironed uniforms of their childhood. Some walked alone and regal, some tugged brilliantine-combed grandchildren by the hand, others towed rounded wives by the elbows, perfumed religious women who looked much older than their decently erect husbands. Alberto touched the cold marble of his table and let his reminiscences drown in the well of black coffee in front of him. His former classmates would be there. The surviving ones. Would Amílcar attend the funeral? Would it be possible to recognize him among the sea of mourners? The frantic modernities of the present (because all presents are frantic when we are old) offered many ways to be reunited with ghosts from the past. But Alberto considered those shortcuts immoral,

deprived of decorum, vulgar. He was convinced he could always recognize Amílcar even in the remains of a decrepit crowd.

“Here, *Señor*. A Capurro Moscatel.”

Alberto touched the short crystal stem of the glass with two fingers and looked back at the old waiter with gratitude and curiosity. This bold, gaunt man shared with the *Sol de Lima* the same coat of derelict sadness, the undecipherable paradox of the places and bodies that add so many layers of time to their skin that they aged without changing. Perhaps this man had always been ancient, bald, arthritic. Perhaps his dark eyes had eternally shown the same aqueous, muddy weakness. Sad, like the old walls of Lima, licked by the same persistent rain, that had paraded in front of Alberto as his taxi took him from the airport to the hotel the night before.

Alberto sipped the liquor with candor. He had stopped drinking alcohol some years ago. It's difficult when you live in the country of wine, champagne, and cognac, and your life companion specializes in tasting the libations of the Rhine. But doctors in Strasbourg are not only attractive and good-mannered but also strict and sometimes even morbid in their predictions. So, he abandoned the pleasures of spirits and younger sommeliers only to return to the other side of the world and break the rules across from his old school, still alive and disobedient, ready for Father Evaristo's funeral.

He elegantly proceeded to alternate the fire of the pisco with the bitterness of the coffee in a dance far from French manners and close to Peruvian ceremonies. More men approached the school and the chapel from different angles. Their accelerated gait was not only a response to punctuality but to the perfunctory showers from the gray sky of Lima. Alberto kissed the rim of his glass, sipped the amber liquid with devotion, and recreated in his mind the rushed daily walks of all those boys in the school, regimented by the pious Fathers, corralled by bitter educators, tamed by military coaches. Alberto had sat many times at this same table fifty years in the past, waiting for his father's chauffeur to pick him up, swallowing his hot chocolate with salty tears of shame for being too shy, too blond, and too rich. Little Alberto, the silent, chubby high schooler, appalled by terror and confusion. If only he could see Amílcar today. If only he could shake the hand of the man that boy had become. Amílcar, the dark-haired, brave, and strong soccer champion, whose muscles, chiseled with artistry in the rough streets of poor Lima neighborhoods, had protected Alberto after the incident. Alberto raised his glass toward the school. Even if he didn't see Amílcar today, even if Amílcar had preceded Father Evaristo on the path to the tomb, Alberto was happy he had come back. This same undulated

window in front of his old self had been the perfect parapet to cry on rainy days. Nobody could see the saddest student crying from outside a window polluted with rain.

“Are you out of your mind!” A young man yelled at the waiter. The poor old man was trying to wipe the man’s trousers and shoes with a white cloth. A tilted coffee cup was lying dangerously on the edge of the table.

“I apologize, *Señor*,” stuttered the server as a litany repeated too many times among the wooden walls of the café. The handsome patron looked at Alberto and combined a frustrated frown with a silly smile that Alberto admired but didn’t encourage. Peruvian teeth, he thought, too many and too appealing, illuminating the chocolate features of a local businessman. Like the white, cruel teeth of all those boys at school, running rowdy to the showers after an extended soccer match. Cruel teeth and laughter in the lockers, cruel hands and fingers under the hot water of a common space shared by brutal projects of decent men in black suits. Fingers and nails and arms and legs on young Alberto’s skin. In the showers. Behind the chapel across the street. Five decades ago. Until Amílcar showed up and turned off the showers and the mocking from hell.

Alberto turned his eyes from the young, offended customer and drank the dregs of his coffee, wondering if Father Evaristo had known it all along. He had been the only clergyman with a soul in that school, the only man in Alberto’s adolescence who had touched his shoulder with compassion and firmness, with support and permission. Father Evaristo had seen Alberto crying at the café once. He needed to exchange some petty money for bigger bills. A convenient transaction for a cafe that always needed small change and for a school church that received too many alms in coins. But the priest had never mentioned Alberto’s tears nor his dubious smiles of gratitude.

A rectangular strip of paper with the *Sol de Lima* logo and some handwritten numbers landed on Alberto’s table. “Would that be all, *Señor*?” Alberto noticed the yellowish fingernails of the waiter’s shaky hand in perfect accord with his tobacco-stained mustache.

“Yes, yes. I need to go.”

“Are you attending the funeral, *Señor*?”

“I am. I used to be a student of the Father.”

“I know. I will be there in a minute, too. We can share my umbrella if you want.”

Alberto stood up, threw a couple of extra coins into the silver tray with the bill, and looked at the waiter with curious eyes, like an archaeologist presented with an ancient map. The lines deformed, the topography familiar.

“I am glad you came back, Alberto. It seems life has treated you well. Come close, my friend! You will get soaked.”

It is easier to cry in the rain. Not even Amílcar could notice that he was once more protecting Alberto. From the old showers and the new, under the leaded Lima sky.