

The Fall Of The Kapok Tree by Veronique Bequin

Domingo died last night. The storm didn't kill him. He died in his bed. He died of old age with his wife Celia by his side. I wasn't there to say goodbye. This morning, I am walking in the field behind Domingo's house. The wide meadow lies between his house and mine. The field is on my land but Domingo's single dairy cow often wanders there. His horse grazes here too, seeking the cool shade of the trees. I like to know they stray.

The big storm overnight was nothing like the hurricane that hit hard three years ago. Last night's storm raged for a few hours after I went to bed. It was all over by dawn. For a while before falling asleep again, I heard the wind and rain from my bed through the thick walls and the thin windows of my small house. I didn't hear Domingo's last breath. My lungs lost all their wind when Celia came to tell me of Domingo's passing earlier today. I am walking without really breathing.

The knock at the door woke me. I still sleep in the same narrow bed I did as a boy. I am a grown man. An old man. As old as Domingo Moreira was. He died first but I won't be far behind now. I never moved into my parents' large bed after they both died. It didn't seem right when I knew I would sleep alone. My bed is nearly as old as I am. My father built it when the crib grew too small for his only child. My father made much of the furniture in the house. I helped him often once I could be trusted with his tools. Mother and Father have been gone for twenty years at least. One after the other within days; the bed too large for the one left behind. I haven't changed a thing in the house.

Mother and Father liked Domingo. They liked the whole Moreira family. They celebrated with them all when Domingo and Celia married and started to have sons and daughters. Three sons. Two daughters. All married in turn. All with children of their own. Celia won't want for company. Domingo made sure of that. My mother and father never asked me about giving them grandchildren.

Celia stood at my door this morning with her face calm and her dry, dark eyes looking at me, unblinking. Perhaps, she was looking for a sign? "He passed in his sleep" she said. "He just stopped breathing. No pain. It was his time." He just stopped breathing. Celia may have heard my chest cave in when the air seeped out and wouldn't come back in. No. I don't think she did. Her eyes stayed on my face. I didn't give her any sign. We didn't speak for a moment. Then: "He was a good man." I said. "A good husband." Celia said. "That he was, Gregorio Rodriguez." She used my name. I have not been a husband, good or otherwise. I didn't reply. I took Celia's hands in mine and told her to just ask if she needed anything; anything at all. She won't ask. Her sons and her daughters, her grandsons and granddaughters, they will help. She walked away across the meadow, back to the house she shared with Domingo Moreira for close to sixty years. I went back to sit on my narrow bed and felt my heart grow so sore and tight I couldn't weep. Domingo is gone.

When I could put one foot in front of the other again, I walked outside. Here I am now, in the field between my house and his. The air carries the muddled scents of bruised flowers and crushed leaves that come after a storm. The grasses in the meadow are wounded. The overnight rain was heavy and hit every single blade until each stem bent to the ground. The blades of grass will stand again. Already, the heat of the morning sun is stroking them back to life. The birds are back too. A pair of zunzuncitos is humming near the bruised flowers by the house. Here is a flash of a meadowlark's bright yellow chest. I can hear the gurgly chew-chew of some martins though I don't see them.

I meander through the trees, some planted by my grandfather, and even his father before him. A few fruit trees are from my father's time, mango trees and grapefruit trees carefully spaced out with a few plantain and banana trees among them. I planted a couple of small papaya and

guava trees which continue to bear fruit alongside two avocado trees. But the taller trees are my favourites. Of course, there are several palma reals. They grow fast and strong, just like Cuba according to Fidel when he was still alive. I turn the corner furthest away from my house and closest to Domingo's farm. That's when I see the kapok tree.

The storm was too much for it. It lies on its side, its branches intertwined in the wounded grass. I come to it in the morning heat. It didn't hit any of the surrounding shrubs as it fell but left the other trees to thrive. Domingo Moreira helped me plant it. We were only young men, closer to the boys we had been than the adults we would grow into. A few days before, a neighbour had seen the flares from the Americans on the beach. A local fisherman, he had ran all the way to the secret military base set up by Fidel to alert the soldiers there. We all knew something like that would happen. Fidel made sure we were ready. La Playa Giron is still my local beach. I no longer launch my small fishing boat from there now that I am too old, but Domingo and I set off on many a fishing trip over the years. At least once a week if Celia didn't need him at home. We were lucky some days, and brought in a good catch, and we sometimes came back with nothing to show. We painted the small wooden craft together every few years. Domingo always laughed at my choice of colours: bright blue and green one year; purple and red another time. Once I even opted for the loudest pink and blue I could find! It reminded me of the beautiful bee hummingbirds in my garden. When we could no longer row that boat, I missed sitting facing Domingo's serious eyes for a whole day at a time. We started to play chess instead, eye to eye, neither of us champion material.

Domingo helped me plant the kapok tree soon after my father and I had cut down several specimens that had reached maturity. Planting new trees felt right to celebrate the invaders' defeat. My mother and I used the fibres of the felled kapoks to replenish the mattress on my narrow bed. As it was my first attempt at using kapok fibres, Domingo came to check the finished bedding and his approval meant more to me than my own father's silent nod. Domingo ran his large hands on the cool mattress with a smile, and that night I dreamed he was still there with me in the cool darkness of my room. He was already married then, with his first child on the way. His mother had made sure of that.

I move nearer to the fallen tree. I close my eyes to the sun, the smells of bruised flowers and wounded grasses bleed softly into my face. My old arms can't go all the way round the trunk of the kapok tree but my head rests on the warm bark naturally. My whole body leans into the tree I planted with Domingo Moreira in April 1961. A lifetime ago. My hands are smaller than Domingo's; my fingers more crooked, but as strong as his were. My face is against the skin of the tree, warm and rough as an unshaven chin.

"Toco-toco-tocoro-tocororo" The sound reaches me through the trees. "Toco-toco-tocoro-tocororo". There it is again. I don't open my eyes. Not yet. My old man skin rests against the unshaven skin of an old tree, and I know the tocororo has come. The beautiful bird has come as Domingo and the kapok tree lay dead. "Toco-toco-tocoro-tocororo". My mother always said the trogon bird was a harbinger of good news, that it connected whoever heard its song to higher spiritual powers. I rest my old body on the kapok tree a while longer. Perhaps, the bird is here to let me know I will soon sit face to face with Domingo Moreira again. "Toco-toco-tocoro-tocororo." I won't shave until that happens.