

Guatemala 1954— Funeral for a Bird

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Maximo Sanchez crawled into the light. He had been hiding with his mother under the big old desk. Now that the bombs had stopped, he could see the world. He wanted to see the things his mother had told him about: elephants, houses, spiders and streets. Maybe he would hear someone call his name, and if he did he could answer. His mother had told him this, and his age too. He was five years old and already knew so much! Well, he was four and a half in truth, but Maximo felt bigger if he said five. He said so with scars on his cheeks. They were scars from something called welts. Everything had its name. Maximo went through the zigzagging streets, between the ruins of the houses. He looked for everything, and its name.

There were bodies all around him. These were called corpses. His mother had told him not to touch, because they were filled with nasty worms. He had asked his mother if there were worms in him too, but she said they were just in the dead. Poor little corpses. He wanted to play. It was a pity they were dead. But they stank so much! They deserved to die for smelling so badly. He continued to walk with one hand over his nose and the other over his belly. And his father? Would he smell too? No! His father wouldn't sink. He wasn't dead—only maybe. His mother had told him that his father had disappeared. Maybe now that the bombs had stopped, his father would return. Máximo remembered his father's handsome mustache. Will you come back Father? Soon? Will you come back?

Máximo could walk in any direction unless the streets were blocked by corpses or fallen walls. That was called freedom. But the air wasn't free of the stench, and this freedom had its limitations. He lifted one foot, balanced lightly on the other leg, and leaped, arms open, over a puddle of blood in the street. Despite that, everything seemed possible. To fly, to float, to wash, to run here, to run there, to run always. He felt free.

Then it began to rain, softly at first. One drop followed another, with plenty of time between one drop and the next. He could feel each drop caress his hair, and see their explosions against the remains of the old walls. Inside the drops he saw red and blue colors. Drops crisscrossed and absorbed yellow until they touched the grey dust ground. Then they ran together in colorful furrows, and grew like a spider's web. Where was Father? Playing the spider? The drops fell more forcefully, falling without end. Máximo got cold and wet, pursued the colors, caught shades of marine blue spilling behind violets. He ran through the streets, goose bumps forming on his skin instead of welts. He

passed smiling corpses, mouths open, and feared they would bite at his heels. His mother had told him they wouldn't move, but Máximo wasn't sure. He studied a cockroach scurrying from one of the open mouths. Were they born inside a dead person? How would they know when they were born? Something struck him on the forehead and fell in the mud.

A bomb? He searched for it and found something like a cold piece of glass that melted. More of these began falling on every side. A big one hit his shoulder. He had to find a place to hide. It was cold. It had never been cold under the desk. He hoped his mother would still be waiting there with her white hair and toothless mouth. Would she still be bent? Maybe he ought to go back. Then another hit him. And he went on without knowing its name. Maybe he ought to go back?

There it is! Look at it!

He was in a very narrow alley. In its center, there was a dead bird. So he was not the only one! Children of all sizes were there shouting.

A dead bird! A dead bird!

He had never seen a bird, dead or alive, except in photos from old magazines at home. He had looked at them all the time. This bird was smaller than he had imagined it, silently crossing the sky with bombs under its wings.

A dead bird! A dead bird!

The children ran toward him, and he ran too. He didn't see the headless body behind the pile of mossy bricks. He stumbled on it and got his belly full of mud. Blood dripped from scratches on his arm, but he didn't cry. Instead, in a fit of anger, he kicked the corpse, his foot sinking through the body as though it were a cotton sock. Corpses, corpses at every turn! Then he remembered the bird.

Look at it!

Soon a circle of children surrounded it, and the eldest watched that no one got too close. Careful there! Don't step on it! Brutes! One of the littlest boys started to cry. But Máximo wouldn't do that. In sepulchral silence, the eldest kneeled, facing the body. Poor bird. He touched it and trembled. Murmurs. He extended his middle finger to stroke its tiny breast. The murmurs grew. Someone pushed through the group to see, and stepped on Máximo's foot. But at this moment, only the bird mattered. Poor bird. Let's touch him too. No. Such a delicate body would be torn to pieces. Poor bird. Its rounded breast was covered with dots white and soft as the drops of rain. Its wings pressed down around its body as if in protection from the cold. Its neck was long, almost too long, and ended in the head where a big black eye and open beak protruded. Stiff feet stretched directly upward. You think the hail killed him? No. When something hits, it leaves marks. Look at what the bombs did. But this is different, bombs explode. Why should this be different? They kill don't they? Yes, but they kill differently. Maybe he broke his neck? Maybe. The eldest crouched down, and carefully took the head of the bird between his forefinger and thumb. He lifted it a little. Everybody bent down to be able to see better. What are we going to do with him? He laughed, already knowing they had to bury it. Of course, everybody shouted. We must bury the bird. Poor bird. Máximo saw the beautiful bird, as he had seen the colors fleeing from the dead walls. All the birds were gone.

Everyone ran towards the ruins to look for objects for the funeral. Máximo didn't know what to look for. He had never been to a funeral. He hadn't heard anything about them. He had seen pictures, but wondered what a funeral could be. The eldest said they should bring pretty things, but Máximo knew he

couldn't grasp the colors. Nevertheless, he searched for something, something that glowed, and he began to dig through the ruin closest to him.

Beautiful things. I only want beautiful things!

One of the boys brought a board. Another brought a colorful cloth. One found a picture of a rose. A tall freckled boy rang a silver bell. Someone had tallow candles. There was a watch. An oilcloth slipper. A medal from the air force. Two pairs of pants. A yellowed laundry ticket. Máximo was the last to arrive. I found a ring! A precious ring, he shouted. The circle of children parted so he could pass and place his offering at the feet of the dead bird. He was proud of his discovery. And it was truly precious. Solid gold with a delicious aquamarine mounted exactly in the center. The finger it encircled also seemed beautiful.

Was it the finger of a woman? Look at the fingernail. Maybe. But it isn't painted. Some women don't paint them. Maybe it's a Martian finger—it's half green. No, that's because its rotting. It isn't rotting, it's only half burned, if it were rotting it would stink. Perhaps then it would smell good? You haven't by chance smelled a corpse, ever?

"Okay, enough," said the eldest. "We have to bury the bird. Is everyone in agreement? Good." With everyone pushing for a good view, he crouched before the body and gathered it up in cupped hands. He put it on the board, and some of them applauded. "Good. Now you cover it with this cloth," he ordered, "and we'll put the insignia above the head. Like that. The great dead pilot. Put the ring at the feet, finger and all. It's the finger of its owner."

The freckled boy with the little bell led the procession. Stopping on each corner, he rang it shouting, "There is a dead bird! A dead bird!" A line of pious boys carried candles and followed the photograph of

the rose held high in the air so that everyone could see. Two boys hung the trousers on pointed sticks like flags. One brought the golden crucifix without any body. The board with the deceased, carried on the shoulders of the six eldest boys, came next, with the youngest children, Máximo among them, scrambling into the rear of the line. The rain continued falling. But the bird was dead. They would have to bury it in the rain.

They decided to bury the bird by an intersection in a vacant lot. The youngest ones dug the hole with sticks, the oilcloth slipper, an old broom. The land was soft and moist, and in almost no time at all they had a large enough hole.

The trousers were put in place at the bottom. On top of them, the photo of the rose, face upward. And after that the board with the body and its precious adornments. Everyone stood in a circle around the grave, with their eyes fixed on the lifeless feathery body. The only movement was the murmuring rain. The oldest boy took the crucifix and let it fall on the body. Good. Cover it. All at once, they dug into the mud, each trying to throw more dirt than the others. No one saw the old man who approached.

"Children, hey, you over there! What's going on?" They all whirled around. Máximo saw the old man, black coat dragging in the mud, legs bent and half useless. He was leaning on a wooden stick, and there was mud and food on his filthy gray beard. His pallid skin was covered with splotches of welts, especially on either side of his broad nose. His jaw bone shook.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

They stood there paralyzed, afraid. The smallest one cried again. Another one ran away. Soon, very soon, there was an avalanche of boys pushing, elbowing, scratching, all to get away from the place as fast as possible.

"Don't leave! Don't leave! I just asked what you were doing!"

Máximo was the only one left. He scrutinized the old man. Could this be his father? No. The old man had no mustache. If he were his father, he would have a mustache. This is how he had always seen him in pictures. His mother had also mentioned that the gringos had no mustaches, but his father did. He wondered why everyone else had run away. And this old man—why were his hands trembling? His feet twisted? Why did he have hair in his ears? Should he have fled also? Maybe the old man only wanted to talk. Why should he be scared?

"Hey there little fellow! Will you come here?"

Máximo was scared. "I have to go home. My mother is waiting for me under the desk."

"Don't worry my boy, this old man isn't going to hurt you."

"I have to go. It's simple."

The old man shouted to the other boys. "I see you! There you go! You act like rats scurrying around the ravines. There—by the Street of Illusions and Street of Sighs."

Máximo looked. Street of Illusions. Street of Sighs. For the first time he realized that the streets, like people, have names. Máximo had a lot to learn.

"By the bones of my grandmother!"

The old man hobbled over to Máximo.

"What were you rascals doing here anyway?"

"A bird died. We were burying it."

"A funeral for a bird?" said the old man.

"Yes. We found it on the street and couldn't leave it there. It was so beautiful and soft. Someone might have stepped on it."

"Of course. Did you find it on that street? The Street of Sighs?"

"Yes, that one. Then we decided to bury it here. We dug a hole in the dirt and put it inside. Then we covered it."
"You did this and nothing more? You didn't leave something to accompany it and to protect it from the cold?"

"Yes we did. We had a procession, and gave it a ring and a medal of gold."

"Well, you made an effort, but this isn't how to bury the dead. Of course, it wasn't your fault. I'm sure none of you have had experience in the matters of death. But let me continue. When you have the bird on the board, you must burn it with incense. Then sprinkle the body with flowers of death and some drops of *indita**. This helps the soul on the road to infinity. Of course, these days you couldn't have located any *indita*. But you could have improvised. And there's one more thing. When you lift the board, you must give three turns to the right and four to the left. Seven in all. This is to confuse the soul so that it can't return to this life of misery. Imagine if the poor thing had to live life all over again? Of course, you wouldn't understand." The old man opened his mouth to laugh. But nothing came out of it.

Translated by Ann Koshel

*Guatemalan Spanish, meaning "small Indian woman"; also the name of a strong drink, said to have an "indita" in the bottle.