

Floating
Midnight

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Michael G. Richards



For

my mother, Lorraine A. Richards
and my father, Donald G. Richards

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Unamuno's Cousin

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comes down to words in the end. Alejandro San Martín are the words of his name. Do they sound like what he is? He has wondered. His mother once said that his great grandfather was Miguel de Unamuno's cousin. He prefers to think of himself as a flesh-and-blood Unamuno. Now *there* is a word! Oo-nah-moo-no. A word worth being. And he, Alejandro, had been given the name of a character from Unamuno's story, "*Nada Menos que Todo un Hombre.*"

The blood of the famous Basque writer flows through his own, right out into the form of his face, the contours of which are described in books as wedge-form, with the greatest breadth at the temples. A Basque face. He has been told.

The professor in his advanced conversational Spanish class had taken the greatest interest in his genealogy, devoting a full class one humid afternoon last May to describing the “unique agglutinative” character of Basque—the language of Unamuno—which Alejandro can feel coursing through his veins like a Spanish bull. Indeed, Alejandro has heard Unamuno’s blood talking to him—as if he himself were Unamuno’s cousin—though he has seldom understood all the words it uses. And so he won the grant from his college to attend the University in Madrid—to translate the words of Unamuno that whisper in his veins and to become the writer that his blood demands of him.

But first there is this girl who is like an angel—and if he is right, they have come together as if gods or fate have been involved. Unamuno, the romantic, would have followed her to the moon.

He leans out over the sill of the window and peers down into the courtyard five floors below. Quietly she turns the pages in a book. She uncrosses her legs and recrosses them. She tucks her hair behind her ear and brushes a fleck of dust from her skirt.

It is past midnight. He should take a book of his own and go down into the courtyard. *El Patrón* had told him that the courtyard is open to all inhabitants of the building. First he must write to her, because that is what Unamuno would do—he would explore his words for her on paper and then, with confidence, he would approach her. She flips her long black hair over her shoulder and turns another page.

There is heat in the air, even though it is September—a sort of energy welling up from the deep guts of the city and giving charge to the pulsating life on its surface. He himself had pulsed right along with that life for the past four hours. He had walked through the *Plaza Mayor*, dined at the *Salon de Matiste*, where the swarthy *camareros* his father’s age smirk from dark cor-

ners, had drunk coffee in a small place near the *Teatro de Artes Bellas*, and then had mingled with the youthful crowd below the cathedral where the brick embankments have been elegantly crumbling for centuries.

Though he mingled, he spoke with no one. His was a mingling-in-spirit, for he knew himself to be as one with them, though *they* seemed to have not yet recognized this kinship of the spirit.

On one of the disintegrating embankments, where the glaring gargoyles thrust their faces over pedestrians' heads among reliefs labeled *Jesuchristo* and *la Virgen*, he had sat contentedly waiting for the other students to recognize him. With furtive glances he had studied his compatriots-in-spirit, had seen their dark romantic gazes, their side-of-the-mouth commentaries, their existential expressions of self-doubt and universal loathing. He had shared their countenances, their philosophies, their justified cynicism, though he never spoke a word with one of them, nor even made eye contact that was intentional on their part.

That is when she appeared, like a bride descending the water-stained steps of the cathedral passage, alone like him, her backpack carelessly thrown across her delicate shoulder, the white street lamp illuminating the fringes of her black hair like a veil. She wore all black, elevating her angelic appearance with irony.

He turns away from the window and the city's heat and sits at a small veneered desk in a hostel owned by a dynamic little man who introduces himself to wide-eyed Americans as *El Patrón*. This man had met him as soon as he stepped off the airport shuttle onto the bright sidewalk of the *Plaza del Sol* wondering why he hadn't thought to arrange for a place to stay in Madrid while he waits for word from the University that his dorm room is ready. *El Patrón* handed him a soiled business card that read,

HOSTEL

N.a Señora Del Camino

Todo Comfort

C/Fuencarral, 39, 3.1-D

Tel.: 523 86 81

He would have to stay over at least one night in the hostel, which had looked comfortable enough, as well as one could tell from a soiled card and a stranger's smile.

Soon he would have to move to the University. But first he must find out if he is right about Her. At the small desk—with an incurable wobble from one leg having been sawed off too short—he begins to compose a letter that cannot be sent. A letter in which he will find words for her, conjure the magic of language that his ancestor passed down to him through his blood.

As he labors over each of his words, sweat forms on his fingers and on his brow over his thick eyebrows and flows down the bridge of his nose. He kicks off his heavy Doc Martins and unbuttons his shirt. Then he gets up from his chair and opens the window to face the stiff, warm breeze from the dry plateaus of the south. He sits down to finish his letter. When finished, he folds the letter and slips it under his pillow.

In the morning, he awakes shivering for he had left the window open and the breeze now comes from the east, chilled and moist. He closes the window and dresses, then reaches under his pillow and takes out the letter and slips it into the back pocket of his pants. He hurries through the narrow white halls of the hostel, nodding a brief good morning to *El Patrón*'s quiet wife, short as a stump and muscular, making her sleepy way through a vacant bedroom carrying a mop and bucket.

Nuts and Bolts

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The tiny lump—hard and cratered like a dried wad of chewing gum—appeared on a Saturday morning when Richard had remembered a lesson from ninth grade health class. The young teacher, Miss Clark—a curvaceous brunette in a pinstriped suit and high heels—had instructed the boys to go home and feel their genitals for lumps. The way she had said it—the alleged and soon to be legendary inflection in her voice—had been the subject of wild speculation and fantasy for weeks afterward. The word *lump*, and all of its clinical implications, had completely disappeared from her statement as soon as it passed her immaculately painted lips.

Floating Midnight

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*world falls apart, there is a moment
in that instant before the
of silence that begins to be
filled with a protest. And then a light—like they say the dying see.*

I came across Tanya Daniels the other day at the Giant, and the troubling thing she said to me made me want to return to one of those moments in my life, to Fox Lake, after five years—just to see it ... and to remember Tobias as he once was. The floating dock was gone, and the lake was ringed by a dense thicket of weeds and bushes of honeysuckle. The wealthy neighborhood surrounding the lake seemed to have withdrawn; the backs of the houses that used to open up their elaborate decks to the lake, now seemed to have turned away.

Homeboy

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have come to visit my
father, who has gone into hiding
in the apartment where he
grew up. He is pursued by IRS agents, an arbitrator for the
Central Allied Corporation, a prosecutor for the U.S. Superior Court
in Manhattan.

It has been two years since I last saw my father, one year since his life pulled apart at the seams like a cheap shirt, and six months since he ran off to Astoria. I have tried to speak with him on the phone, but our conversations are always cut short by urgent business that he must attend to. I don't know what business that could be, now that he has been fired by Central Allied, unless he is preparing his own defense. But my mother, who strongly encouraged this visit, tells me that he has done absolutely nothing to defend himself against the accusations that have ruined him.

Real World Experience

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R ecently I did some Internet research on the M82A1 built by the Barrett Company out of Tennessee. I knew this gun by touch and sight, but I wanted to know more. Apparently, the US had a contract with Barrett in the late eighties and supplied Afghan guerrillas with the long-range rifle so they could pick-off invading Soviets from high in the rocky crags of Afghanistan.

She is dead and I know nothing about her. Yet I am familiar with the intricate details of the M82A1—like how it required constant maintenance and replacement parts that I'm sure the *camaradas* never gave it. I know so much about this gun, and I know virtually nothing about her. I can see every line, every