

The House on Camino Ratama

El Camino Ratama was a dirt road just outside the reach of community zoning laws. Someone put up a hand painted sign that resembled the town's official ones. The street led to a neighborhood of tiny ramshackle houses where dogs, chickens and children ran loose. The nicest house had a leaning chain link fence surrounding the lot. A tall Mexican fan palm stood like a sentry at each corner. Together, the fence and the palms marked an oasis in the dust. It was filled with lovingly tended hibiscus, bougainvillea, gardenia, roses and sunflowers. The house was very pink.

Case knocked at the loose screen door. He planned on spending an hour showing Sixto the basics of CPR and making his excuses before dinner. He was truly irritated with himself for caving in so easily to this request. He thought about not showing up, but hell, he had no other plans tonight. So, here he was.

From the number of different voices he heard inside, he wondered how many people could live in 800 square feet. He was surprised by who rushed to the door to greet him. Three wild young boys bounced off the walls of a narrow entrance way. One of them announced, "Es El Gringo!" Case recognized Alberto. Instead of stepping back to make room for Case to enter, it seemed they pressed forward with eagerness only enjoyed by the very young. Sixto appeared behind the boys and elbowed his way to the door.

"We call them Los Lobos." He explained. On cue, the boys howled like wolves. A Chihuahua joined the song. He put so much energy into his bark that his little feet left the ground with every yap.

"Is Alberto your son?"

"No. He is my best friend. Right, Alberto?" Sixto gave a wolf howl of his own.

Just when Case found room to make his move to squeeze into the house, more people filled the hallway. The faces looked familiar and by the time he made it to the living room, he began to recognize many of these people from Sunday afternoon at the park. Their faces looked different with smiles on them.

Alberto shoved his pet box turtle in the air for Case to greet. He then came eye to eye with a Scarlet Macaw who introduced herself as Lola. Lola sat on a high rack attached to her owner's back. The homemade contraption that rested on his shoulders was decorated with well-chewed bird toys and hastily wiped bird droppings. Case shook the man's hand.

María Sanchez, Alberto's mother, tearfully thanked him over and over for rescuing her son. They were all so glad to see him. This was exactly what Case hated, a party in his honor for doing something that anyone would do. Saving a life was not a conscious act of bravery. It was just a reaction, undeserving of such hullabaloo. How would he endure this?

That was when he saw Catarina de la Alvarado floating through the sea of faces with the grace of a ghost. She carried a cake. It had blue roses made of icing covering the top and circling the bottom. The single candle was a sparkler left over from some Cinco de Mayo past. Someone turned off the lights and Catarina started singing Las Mañanitas, the traditional birthday song. The glow from flying bits of light framed a snapshot of her face that would remain in Case's mind the rest of his life. Whenever he thought of her she would be floating in a golden halo of ethereal sparks just like this.

Catarina placed the fiery cake in front of an older woman. The sparkler sputtered out. The light flipped on again and eighteen people plus the ones hanging out the back door into the yard shouted, “Abuelita! Feliz Cumpleaños! Speech, speech!”

Case felt foolish. The party was not for him. Small, lovely and brown, Abuelita curtsied and held up her hand to silence her subjects. “I declare we will eat the cake now, before dinner. Life is short. Dessert must come first!”