

## La Novena

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**M**y father died. It was it late August, just before I left for my first year of college. I am the first person in my family to finish high school and the first to go to college. It created an odd situation with everyone except my father who told me how proud he was of me many times including the very night he died in his sleep. My mother brags to everyone about my going to college, but to me, it seems like my studies are more of a nuisance to her. I know she worries a lot about money. I have a scholarship for books and other expenses, and it is based solely on my high school performance and some test scores. (The Director told me that I am the best student to ever graduate from my high school.) There is also some local assistance for as long as I can keep my scholarship, but that looks certain now as I am in my last year.

My father was a Sabanero, a “rancher.” I put it in quotes because I don’t think we ever had more than a dozen cows and often much less; it was never enough to make ends meet. We had to rent land to graze them and 10 or 12 are just not enough to live on. I suppose that if we lived near the Central Valley where land is expensive we could not have made it at all. My older brother always said he wanted to be an engineer, but he would not study enough to finish school. He contributed some to the family but not much, so my father worked part-time for several years for another rancher, a Don Rafa, who was a very nice man. He was rugged yet handsome like a “Marlboro Man,” except for the beginning of a little pot belly, and he was a widower or divorcee, we could never be sure which.

My outrageous girlfriends could be quite explicit about their plans for Don Rafa. We had fun talking about him and it always seemed to come up when we tired of talking about “boys.” My girlfriends often laughed about how men look at us. They all agreed that often you could feel it as much as see it. One claimed that she looked “right back,” and I do not doubt her at all. (I have always wondered, *can boys feel the looks that girls give them?*) We talked about how to stand and move when boys were around to get them to look, and one of my friends said she practiced whenever she saw Don Rafa. “So far,” she said, “no

luck, but I have some new heels and I am not through with him yet.” We laughed because we knew she might be serious. Our talks were the usual thing at that age, kind of giggly, but our friend seemed quite serious about how she intended to move her plan along. I laughed with them, as much as anyone, but I still felt shy about such talk. I did not to say anything about this to my mother.

I was seventeen at the time my father passed and I think I had already begun to look like my mother. My face is clearly that of my father but I have my mother’s mouth. I am much more intellectual and quieter than she. I have never known her to actually read the front page of a newspaper and it is something of a miracle that I study literature in university. Perhaps my father was very smart and we never knew it because he was so nice, such a really good man actually. I was always his favorite. The funeral was the day after he died. Afterwards, I followed my mother as she walked up the road with a neighbor. I remember that she walked with her head held high. I knew, as well as anyone, that the last five years of my father’s life, when he couldn’t work, were drudgery for my mother. It was hard on all of us, beginning from the time of his diagnosis a year before he stopped working. And I sympathized with her even then, as I do now, when I remember what she had to do and to put up with. His kidneys slowly gave way and he should have been on one of those machines but he insisted on leaving the hospital. I guess my brother and I could have been more helpful during those years, but what is done is done.

Don Rafa visited more than a few times while my father was sick, especially for the last year and a half when he could barely sit upright in a chair. He would always bring a small gift and very soon he and my mother dropped the “Don” and “Doña,” when he would stay for dinner and talk with my father. He calls her “Yola,” her nickname, and over time he changed from “muchacha” to “señorita,” for me. At the *novena* he called me “Patricia,” and I finally felt grown up in his eyes. Don Rafa’s visits were the few opportunities that my mother had to dress up a little and to have something interesting to do, perhaps even fun.

We hosted the *rosario* at our house for nine days in the evenings. The religion teacher in our high school volunteered to recite the rosary for us for the entire *novenario* without a fee. We could not afford music, but our neighbors and family were generous with food at the end of each evening. I have always wondered if Don Rafa had something to do with the teacher’s volunteering.

At the graveside, Don Rafa was solicitous and he took my elbow and my mother’s to help us across the drainage ditch that bordered the cemetery. For the *rosario* that night he brought a large pot of chicken and rice, enough to feed everyone. *Who prepared that?* I thought. When she had time to sit, my mother would sit next to him during the service. The chair next to him always remained empty and I wondered if he saved it for her. By this time I was over being jarred by father’s death. *She’s done her duty*, I thought, *maybe she can be happy again*. Except for my uncles, and a poor relative who had little food in his own house, Don Rafa was the only man who came every night.

The third night, after the *rosario* while my mother was busy talking to another guest, he brought his plate and sat in the chair next to me.

“Are you excited about your new life?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I said, “I’m more worried about keeping my scholarship and about criminals in the Capital.” I wanted to sound like the serious person that I really am. In truth, at that time I really was unsure how to talk about myself with a man.

“Well, I have heard that it is not good to go into the parks at night. But if you are ever afraid, just call me. At the least, I have friends in the city who can help you.”

I started to thank him, but my mother came up, “Rafa, I see you have found someone to talk to,” she placed a hand on his arm. “If you get tired of schoolgirl talk, I am sitting right over there.” I blushed, it took a moment but humiliation just rolled over me. *I am NOT a schoolgirl!* I thought. I am sure my mouth dropped open but I could think of nothing to say.

She literally swished away. My embarrassment morphed into anger and I could not respond when he tried to recover our talk, “This does not feel like schoolgirl talk to me.” He said it kindly and I mumbled something, but our conversation dribbled off into eating. Finally I got up and excused myself and went to my room. *How does Ma manage to do it, I thought, why did she say that?* I could hardly sleep, and I got up the next day still angry with her. I wondered if Don Rafa would ever speak to me again except as a little girl.

I did my chores the next day without talking to her but I thought about him. *I wonder if he looks at her? I doubt it, she is getting piggy.* I began to concoct a whole series of clever conversations that I would have with him, none of which would be remotely “schoolgirlish.” I remembered my girlfriends talking about standing and walking around boys and I even thought about how I might comport myself. These thoughts had almost lost their steam when mother told me to go to the little grocery store to get juice for the evening *rosario*. It was a two-kilometer walk and only an hour remained until people were to arrive. I began to fret about having time to wash up and put on something clean to wear. On his way home from the auction, Don Rafa stopped in his big blue cattle truck with the four doors and high wooden sides.

“Buenas tardes, Patricia, may I offer you a ride.”

I had at that moment been thinking about him and I am afraid that my practiced aplomb was not readily available. But I was authentically happy for the ride and climbed in. “Muchisimas gracias, Don Rafa. I scarcely have time to get home and clean up.”

“You look just fine to me,” he said, “and don’t call me Don Rafa. My name is Rafael, Rafa. We are friends and you are no longer a schoolgirl.”

The reference made me blush deeply and he saw it. He looked pleased. “I think your mother was distracted last night and perhaps a little thoughtless, just a mistake perhaps.”

*A little thoughtless!....* I could have gone further down that road of thought but I was so pleased to be talking with him again. It was a short ride and he said goodbye and that he would be back in 30 minutes. It was that moment, on the night of the fourth rosary, that I felt him watch me as I walked away from the truck. And I was very conscious of my walk.

When he returned, most of the people were already here. My mother had held up the beginning of the recitation and she signaled the reciter as soon as Rafa said his hellos. I held back, not wanting to appear too glad to see him. When he did come over the faint odor of cologne wafted from him. "Rafa, it is a pleasure, again." And I put out my hand and leaned into him for a buss on the cheek. I thought I sounded sophisticated, especially with the "Rafa." My mother, who came over to take his arm, looked horrified.

A few minutes later, just as everyone turned to face the reciter, she came up behind me, "It is," she hissed, "*Don Rafa*."

"It is *Rafa*," I smiled straight ahead. "Ask *him* if you don't believe it," and I kept my attention on the reciter. She pinched the skin above my elbow but I clamped my lips tight and refused to acknowledge it.

The meals of the fifth, sixth and seventh *rosarios* were like the fourth night, only more so. The chair next to Don Rafa was used by others more often. I kept myself available if Rafa wanted to talk and as the *novenario* progressed, I also began to sit in the chair. Gradually he spent less time with my mother and the other guests and more with me. My mother seemed confused at first and her vulnerability increased my boldness. She slowly pulled away from both of us. By the eighth and ninth nights she hardened herself and kept busy with other people, ignoring me and Rafa. It was as though she had been defeated in battle and she left the field to me. Or maybe she was plotting her comeback, *or whatever*, I thought, *it hardly matters*. She was very distant with me at other times, barely speaking, but I felt exultant. Sometimes I pitied her. My brother looked at me knowingly or, perhaps appraisingly, I am not sure really, what it was. *Has Rafa said something to my brother?* Rafa and I exchanged cell phone numbers and he called me, "just to test the number," he said, but by now I knew that he wanted to know me better and I was feeling the same way. "Boys" disappeared from my catalogue of interests and discussion. My girlfriends had heard something, even before I regaled them with the news. They were mostly on my side but one of them was a little horrified. All of them treated me with obvious respect, and I left for college feeling more independent than I had ever felt in my life. We lived in a small village west of Santa Cruz in the Guanacaste. It was too far to commute and I had to rent a room near the university.

Rafa called to ask if I wanted a ride, to take my things to the university but it was strange, I was feeling independent of him also and told him I had already made plans. "You could change them," he said, but I declined. "Well," he said, "I come to the Capital a lot on business, perhaps we could have lunch, or dinner."

"For sure," I said. "Be sure to call when you are coming."

College was incredibly busy. I am a conscientious student and do my work every day. I had a roommate then, and we became good friends. It was the first time she had ever lived away from home also, but it was obvious that her family had money and she seemed to handle the changes better than I did. A trip to her home convinced me that her family was richer even than Rafa. I thought she would appreciate, perhaps admire, the fact that an older man was interested in me, but she acted like it was ridiculous. "Oh sure," she said, "all those old guys

want to get in your pants. Especially the first time.” It added a new meaning to “outrageous” for me, and I began to suspect that my other girlfriends were not so sophisticated. I guess that I cannot say I was shocked, but it was clear she came from a much different world than I did. She studied as hard as I and with all the changes, we had so much to do both of us lost touch with our friends at home. After the first month, I never went home on weekends. There were lots of men in college, and I fell in love with my history professor (from a distance of course). It was all just so “eye-opening,” I guess.

Rafa did call several times. And about three months into the semester I met him for lunch. I asked my roommate to go with us but she just turned her mouth down with her, *you must be kidding* look and said, “I don’t think so girlfriend.” I was on my own. How should I say this? I was not happy nor unhappy to see Rafa. Bemused might be the better word from the distance of four years. He was all dressed up wearing his best Mexican boots, a large shiny buckle with silver cow horns and a string tie. He wore a new, wide brim cowboy hat of white felt and seemed very much a part of the *sabanero* world from which I came. In the restaurant, he looked like an old fashioned movie star and he did his very best movie star elegance. A waiter came over to remind him of the no-smoking rule. I felt like other people were watching us and I became uncomfortable. He was, no doubt, out of his own comfort zone, but he acted encouraged and intensified, if possible, his performance of the “dashing caballero.” Honestly, I felt ridiculous. *He is perfect for mother*, I thought.

After that, with a little coaching from my roommate, I discouraged him.

When I went home for the December vacation my mother was changed; she seemed quite happy to see me. She kissed me and held me for an extra long time. My brother also. I loved the new spread for my bed with matching curtains, and it felt good to do my old chores. But now, my mother would ask me to comment on things that, in the past, she assumed to know more than me, about the news or even on something political (as though I keep up with such things), and it felt like being appreciated in a different way. I found myself silently disagreeing with her opinions, *not very educated*, I thought. Still, I began to relax into what felt like a different family and I admit it, I liked being there. On the first Saturday my mother prepared a large lunch and invited some family to join us. They brought food and there was a little beer and chicha so it became a kind of a welcome home party. People were full of questions about college life; the conversation was loud with laughter and everyone joined in. I was having fun and feeling special. Mother was a wonderful hostess, *How is it that I never knew this?* I sat next to her and about halfway through lunch,

“Have you seen Rafa?” I asked.

She turned to me and hesitated. Her face locked up, stone like, her mouth twisted into a tight smile, “No...I hope you are happy.” She said it so only I could hear.

“What do you mean?” The stone cracked. I thought she might laugh.

“Excuse me,” speaking to the table, and she walked into her bedroom. I must have looked confused; the conversation at the table stopped, then resumed slowly. I knew something terrible had happened.

Those of our family who accept the responsibility for keeping things easy doubled their efforts at conversation, but I did not participate. I sat staring at, then dawdling with my food. It must have taken 10 or 15 minutes, while the whole Rafa thing replayed in my mind. This time the view through Ma's eyes sat side by side with the way I remembered it. In that small space of time I came to understand one thing; I excused myself and walked to her bedroom door.

"Come in," she said.

I closed the door behind me and stood there; she sat on the end of the bed. "Ma, I am sorry. Please forgive me."

Her face was haggard and streaked. She looked as though all the fight, hope, and life were draining from her, right in front of me. She wasn't crying but tears seeped from my eyes. From this distance, I imagine that it was from some deep pool, some reservoir of motherness, that allowed her to look up and reach out for my hand. We sat there alone until people went home.