



Rest

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I wish I hadn't gasped when I entered the room.

I hoped he didn't hear me.

The nurse quickly stepped between Mario and me, chirping cheerfully. "Mr. Lopez? You've got a visitor today!" He uttered a low groan, perhaps in response to her voice, perhaps to pain.

I took a deep breath, tried to still the trembling in my voice. "Hey, my brother. How are you?" I regretted the question as soon as it left my lips.

I couldn't bring myself to come closer. I stood at the foot of his bed, unsure what to do with my hands.

He was so small. My older brother, always larger than life, was gone, replaced by a shrunken hint of a man dwarfed in a green hospital gown. The face I'd known for over six decades, the face of which I'd memorized every curve and plane, the face that in the right light nearly mirrored my own now lay slack-jawed on the pillow. His head had been shorn of its curly white mane.

The rattle in his chest told me he didn't have much time left.

The nurse stepped out, leaving me alone with Mario. I swallowed hard around the lump in my throat. I wanted to speak; I didn't know what to say. For years our telephone calls began with colorful insults before we got to the business at hand—he needed money, he had a new conspiracy theory or a scheme to get rich quickly, he'd met a girl. Some days he'd lecture me about crystals, alignment of the planets, ancient Mesopotamians, or the best way to roll a joint, all in a soft drawn-out cadence he'd adopted years ago. When he was angry, though, the caricature hippie voice would be forgotten, and we would bark at each other in sharp tones until one of us hung up the phone angrily.

Even at his best Mario was not easy. Seeing him still and gray on the bed, however, I'd have given a year of my own life just to hear him say, "Hey, *puto*," in that teasing tone once more.

I sat in the chair farthest from him. This shouldn't be so hard; I was no stranger to cancer. I nursed my late wife through a four year bout with ovarian cancer, keeping her at home until she could no longer bear the pain. She passed away in the same hospice facility in which I now stood, looking across the room at the shell of my brother.

This was different though. Everything was different in 2020, even dying.

When Mario was diagnosed in late December, he was almost gleeful. Compared

to the backyard trailer in which he lived, the hospital was warm, with a comfortable bed, good food, and, he confided mischievously, hot nurses. If I could have smuggled him in a pipe and a few grams of herb, he'd be in heaven.

Oncologists and caseworkers weighed in. The prognosis for pancreatic cancer wasn't good, and Mario's general state of health meant he wasn't a good candidate for chemotherapy. Surgery, followed by pain management, meant he'd be comfortable as the medical team figured out next steps. Not much more was promised.

No one in their right mind would release Mario to his trailer to recuperate. It was a damp, dank, hoarder's paradise, the walls permeated with smoke and mold. I spent much of January and February rearranging furniture in my imagination, trying to figure out how to fit Mario into my home. Physically, I could wedge him in; a little shifting of dog, cat, daughter, and girlfriend, and there would be room. Emotionally, I wasn't sure I had another round of cancer care in me. I doubted I had the time, energy, or patience to nurse Mario. I certainly didn't have the money.

But he was my brother. I would not turn him away if he needed me.

March blew in with fierce cold and frightening talk. As bodies piled up in makeshift morgues across the country and whispers of pandemics rustled through daily conversation, I was no longer allowed to visit Mario in the hospital. Instead, I'd stop by the giant sliding glass doors for a squirt of hand sanitizer before handing an aide a bag containing Mario's most recent request—his wallet, a new cell phone charger, the crystal ball from the nightstand in his trailer, warm socks. With each passing week, more restrictions were added, until I faced a masked, gloved security guard looking at my own mask and gloves from behind a Plexiglas barrier.

Mario didn't understand why I couldn't visit him. Illness and medication fogged his mind, and I didn't have the vocabulary or the patience to explain a global pandemic to him. In moments of lucidity, he sent me late night texts wondering if he was going to die. I'd call him and calm him down, but there were moments when I wondered whether we were all going to die of this new disease.

And now, on a cloudy day in June, I stood wordlessly before my brother for the first time in three months. I'd begged his social worker to let me see him in hospice, a place where I could present no danger to him, where there was no danger left to be had.

I forced myself to stand, to go to his bedside. It didn't seem right to stroke his hand; we should have been lightly punching each other's arms in greeting. I wondered if anyone ever had touched him besides nurses briskly bathing him.

My vision blurred through my tears. I wished I had the kind of voice to sweetly sing him home.

It had been so hard to be Mario, taut with anger and broken dreams. If I could have found the words, I would tell him, "Dying will be gentle, easier than this world. Whenever you're ready, let go." Instead, I whispered, "I love you brother," patted his arm, and tiptoed out, knowing we both would rest.

