

PESADILLA (NIGHTMARE)

Raymond Lerma

Pablo had barely managed a forced “buenos días” when he boarded the old, ten-wheeler GMC truck loaded down with farm workers at 5:00 A.M. He had felt gloomy all day and had barely eaten anything for break or lunch. He had avoided the men that he would usually bullshit with as well as the women that he would flirt with as the crew of Mexican farm workers thinned sugar beets in late February two miles east of Stratford.

“¿Qué le pasa a Pablo? ¿Qué? ¿Le mocharon la lengua?” one of his fellow workers asked another as they lined up for a drink of water.

“¿Quién sabe?” answered the co-worker, “A lo mejor viene crudo el vato and here we’re all worried about him. Es posible que se le hayan pasado las copas.”

“I don’t think it’s la cruda, otherwise we would have seen him tirar la goma or drink un chingo de agua but I haven’t noticed him do anything like that. Could it be que anda canicas? Ya está peludo el vato, you know.”

“You’re right, el vato ya está veterano but it ain’t like him to act this way. He’s not the type of vato you go up to and ask what’s bothering him. Es capaz que te dé un azadonazo por andar de metiche. I’d rather not mess with him and get on his bad side.”

Raymond Lerma was born in El Paso, Texas in 1953. His parents moved to Corcoran, California in 1955. Corcoran was the home base for the family as they followed the crops up and down the state. A lifetime learner, he graduated from UC Berkeley with a BA in ethnic studies and Spanish and his teaching credential. His teaching career began in 1977 and continued onto the rest of his life. Always a reader and a writer, Raymond also served as a community leader in Corcoran.

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That's the way it went all day. Pablo didn't talk to anyone and no one felt it was his or her business to find out what the hell was bothering him. Pablo didn't get off the truck when it made its usual stop at Castro's Market on the way home. He waited on the truck for the rest of the crew as they all got off to buy sodas, chips, beer, and chicharrones.

As he got off the truck at his stop and without looking at anyone, he forced himself to mumble, "hasta mañana." His two buddies simply stared at each other as the older of the two made a gesture with his hands and face as if to ask, "¿Y este? ¿Qué trae?"

Pablo washed his face at the llave outside the two-room shack where he lived with his aging mother. He dried himself with the mangas of his work shirt, went inside, put his lunch bag and thermos on the broken down television set and plopped himself face down on the narrow bed in the front room of the casita. He didn't even react to the chillido of the sartén and the hot oil as his mother covered the potatoes and rebanadas de cebolla with a lid after adding salt and pepper.

She then mashed the beans that were already boiling and returned to the masa that was ready to be made into small balls to flatten out into nice, round tortillas. Sprinkling some flour on the table, she used her wooden palote to extend the masa this way and that way until she had a perfectly round and thin tortilla. She then made sure the comal was ready for the tortillas with a quick touch to the comal after licking the tip of her index finger. A few more minutes and she would call out to Pablo to come and eat.

"¡Pablo, vente, hijo, ya está la cena!" she called out from the back room that also served as the kitchen. A few minutes later she once again called out, "¡Pablo, vente, ya está la cena! Pronto, no te hagas de rogar," she joked without realizing that Pablo had not stirred from bed.

Realizing that he had not responded with his usual, "ahí voy", she figured that he was probably coming down with the flu or was perhaps overly tired from un surco pesado. She knew only too well how a surquero could ride a defenseless farm worker. Her motherly emotions got the best of her and she decided against waking him up for supper.

“I’ll keep his *cena calientita* on the stove,” she said to herself as she threw a warm, homemade *colcha* to protect Pablo from the cold, February evening air. She got her knitting bag full of *estambre* and sat in the small kitchen near the warm stove to continue knitting the baby blanket for doña Juana’s granddaughter, who was expecting her first baby in April.

A few hours went by as Pablo’s mother continued to knit the baby blanket when she was startled by Pablo’s strange *gemidos* and noises as he mumbled loudly in his sleep. He tossed and turned several times when she went to check to see if he was okay. Pablo’s mother returned to her knitting only to be startled once again by Pablo’s yelling and groping in his sleep.

“No! No! No!” Then, he let out a loud screech like a *lechuza* that curled the hair on the back of his mother’s weather-beaten neck. “¡Ay, Dios mío! ¡Pablo! ¿Qué te pasa?” his mother continued asking. “You must’ve had a *pesadilla*”, she said to him as she rubbed his back after he had sat up on the bed. “Let me get some water and sugar *para el susto*”, she said to Pablo as she went to the kitchen to prepare the home remedy. “I’ll give you some sugar and fix you some *hierbabuena* y verás que dormirás como un bebé”, she assured him from the kitchen as she took down the sugar and the *hierbabuena* canisters from the top *trastero*.

Pablo’s mother brought the water mixed with sugar for Pablo to drink as he sat with a wild look in his eye on the edge of the bed. She gave him a few spoonfuls while she waited for the water on the stove to boil with the *hierbabuena*.

“¿Qué te pasa, hijo? ¿Por qué gritabas?” she asked Pablo as she felt his forehead for fever. Pablo did not respond as she went to get the *hierbabuena* drink from the kitchen.

“Toma, tómatela toda, hasta que tela acabes toda”, she commanded him to drink. “Con esto se te quitará la calentura y dormirás como un niño”, she explained to him as she helped him take off his muddy shoes and tucked him into bed.

“No te apures por mañana”, she continued talking without realizing that Pablo was already sound asleep by the time she covered him with the warm *colcha*.

“La salud de uno es muy importante”, she continued explaining in Spanish that he would not go to work the next day. He would use the day to rest and recuperate from the bad *pesadilla* and fever.

“No te apures, mijo, mañana you’ll be good as new. I know how they work you at times. I know how *malditos* those row bosses can be and how inconsiderate they can be with the workers. You’ll see, hijo, tonight I’ll cut up some *menudo* and *tempranito*, I’ll go to la *tiendita* for some *maíz* and *chile fresco* and we’ll have your favorite dish *pa’ que te compongas*”, she added as she tucked him in making sure that the cold, February air would not do any more damage to her only son.

Pablo’s mother continued preparing his favorite dish in the tiny kitchen stopping every so often to check on her son as he continued with his *gemidos* as he tossed and turned in his sleep. She was almost falling asleep when she heard the low sound of the ten wheeler’s horn as the row boss/truck driver revved the engine to rush the farmworkers onto the back of the truck to be at the jobsite by daybreak.

“¡Ay! ¡Dios mío! ¿¡Cómo se llegó tan pronto la madrugada!?” she exclaimed to herself as she got off the *sillón* and walked to the door to inform the row boss that Pablo would not be going to work. She opened the door slightly and she shielded her eyes from the headlights with her arm as she signaled that Pablo was still asleep. She motioned with her hand to move on as the farm workers in the back of the truck wondered what had happened to Pablo. A worker riding on the passenger side of truck motioned a thumb and a pinky finger extended out from the other three fingers in an attempt to imply that Pablo had gotten juiced and was too drunk to go to work. Pablo’s mother simply bit her lower lip and slowly shook her head and motioned with her hand to move on, signaling that Pablo would not join the crew for the day.

She quickly closed the door and was surprised that Pablo had not woken up from all the commotion. The last thing she wanted was for Pablo to wake up and jump on the truck without a lunch bag, an empty *thermos*, and an empty stomach. She waited to see if Pablo would stay asleep then decided to get dressed and get to the store as early as possible to buy what she needed for the *menudo*.

As soon as it was clear enough to see, she took off to the store that carried all the Mexican products that she needed. Since the store also doubled as a pick-up and drop-off point for buses headed to and from the fields, she wasn't alarmed when she noticed a large group of farm workers talking in low voices asking questions and demanding answers. Up close to the group she realized that some were crying and hugging one another.

“¿Qué pasaría?” she asked herself. “Why would these people be out here so early? A lo mejor se les pasó el *bas* y ahora no hallan que hacer”, she said to herself as she reached the front of the store. As she reached the door entrance to the store, she learned from the *carnicero* that a truck loaded down with farm workers had collided with a train at the crossing on Kansas Ave. The driver had evidently tried to beat the train and the truck had been hit with such full force that it had exploded burning everyone inside the cab and the shell. The ten-wheeler, highway patrol officials reported, is registered to a farm labor contractor from Corcoran and was reportedly on its way to a sugar beet field in Stratford when the accident occurred. A total of 18 farm workers had been found strewn amongst the short hoes, lunches, and water jugs.

Pablo's mother couldn't believe what she had heard. Pálida and full of *susto*, she seemed to take forever to get back home. She walked back in a daze oblivious to others rushing to and from the store as the tragic news quickly spread throughout the *barrio*. She finally was able to make it back to her *casita* and was finally able to pour some sugar in a glass full of water to help her calm her nerves when she noticed that Pablo was awake but facing the wall with all the *santos* and La Virgen de Guadalupe. His body figure seemed to be dancing to the flame of the votive candles that his mother had placed in front of the image of La Virgen.

“¡Pablo! ¡Pablo! ¡Mijo!” she mumbled, almost crying, “la troca, la troca, el tren, mijo”, as her voice trailed off into a whisper and she reached for her *delantal* to wipe her tears.

“La pesadilla”, Pablo said softly without turning to face his sobbing mother.