

Salsa Nocturna

By Daniel José Older

People say that all geniuses die in the gutter, and I've made my peace with that, but this is ridiculous. Anyway, it's a boiler room, but let me start at the beginning: The whole gigging around at late night bars and social clubs really began drying up right around the time the great white flight did a great white about face. Most of my main night spots shut down or started serving cappuccino instead of El Presidente. Two of my guys moved to PA. Things were looking kinda grim, to be honest with you. I mean, me – I knew it'd work out in the long run – it's not that I'm an optimist, I just know certain things – but meanwhile, the short run was kicking my ass. Kicking all our asses, really.

So when my son's girl Janey came to me about this gig at the overnight center, I had to pay her some mind. Janey's a special kid, I gotta say. I couldn't ask for a better woman for Ernesto either. She keeps him in line, reminds him, I think, where he is from, that he's more than that fancy suit he puts on every morning. And she makes us all laugh with that mouth of hers too. Anyway, she comes to me one morning while I'm taking my morning medicina with my café con leche and bacon, eggs and papas fritas. I always take my high blood pressure pills with a side of

bacon or sausage, you know, for balance.

"Gordo", she says. My name is Ernesto, just like my son, but everyone calls me Gordo. It's not 'cause I'm fat. Okay, it's 'cause I'm fat. "Gordo," she says, "I want you to come interview at this place I work on Lorimer." You see what she did? She made it look like I would be doing her the favor. Smart girl, Janey.

I eyed her coolly and put some more bacon in me. "They need someone to watch the kids at night and later on, maybe you can teach music in the mornings."

"Kids?" I said. "What makes you think I want to have anything to do with kids?"

There's two kinds of people that really are drawn to me: Kids and dead people. Oh yeah, and crackheads on the street but that hardly counts because they obviously have an agenda. Kids seek me out like I'm made of candy. They find me and then they attach themselves to me and they don't let go. Maybe it's because I don't really buy into that whole, 'Aren't they cute?' shit. I just take 'em as they come. If I walk onto a playground, and I swear to you I'm never the instigator, it's like some memo goes out: Drop whatever game you're playing and come chase the fat guy. Family events and holidays? Forget it. I don't really mind because I hate small talk, and if there's one thing about kids, they give it to you straight: "Tío Gordo, why you so big?"

And I get real serious looking. "Because I eat so many children," I say.

Then they run off screaming and, usually, I give chase until I start wheezing.

It beats *How's the music business?* and *Oh, really? How interesting!* Because really and truly, I don't care how everyone's little seed is doing at CUNY or whatever.

I'm not bragging but even teenagers like me. They don't admit it most of the time, but I can tell. They're just like overgrown, hairy five year olds anyway. Also, notoriously poor small talkers.

Janey told me exactly how it would go down and exactly what to say. She's been doing this whole thing for a while now, so she speaks whitelady-ese like a pro. She had this Nancy lady down pat too, from the extra-extra smile to the cautious handshake to the little sing-song apologies dangling off every phrase. Everything went just like she said it would. The words felt awkward in my mouth, like pieces of food that're too big to chew, and I thought that Nancy was on to me right up until she says, "That sounds terrific, Mr. Cortinas."

"You can call me Gordo," I say.

It's called a non-profit but everyone at the office is obviously making a killing. The kids are called *minority* and *emotionally challenged*, but there's a lot more of them and they show a lot more emotions than the staff. It's a care facility, but the windows are barred. The list goes on and on, but still, I like my job. The building's one of these old gothic numbers on the not-yet-gentrified end of Lorimer. Used to be an opera house or something, so it's still got all that good, run-down music hall juju working for it. I show up at 9 p.m. on the dot, because Janey said my sloppy Cuban time won't cut it here so just pretend I'm supposed to be there at 8 and I'll be alright. And it works.

They set up a little desk for me by a window on the fifth floor. Outside I can see the yard and past that a little park. I find that if I smoke my Malagueñas in the middle of the hallway, the smell lingers like an aloof one-night stand 'til the morning and I get a stern/apologetic talking to from Nancy and then a curse-out from Janey. So, I smoke out the window.

It's a good thing that most of the kids are already sleeping by the time I arrive, because even

as it is I can feel my presence course through the building like an electrical current. I can't help it. Occasionally a little booger will get up to make a number 1 or number 2 and not want to go back to bed. I make like I'm gonna slap 'em and they scatter back to their rooms. Soon they'll be on to me though.

A little after midnight, the muertos show up. They're always in their Sunday best, dressed to the nines, as they say, in pinstriped suits and fancy dresses. Some of them even have those crazy Spanish flamenco skirts on. They wear expensive hats and white gloves. While the children sleep, the muertos gather around my little desk on the fifth floor foyer and carry on. Mostly they dance, but a few of them bring instruments: Old wooden guitars and basses, tambores, trumpets. Some of them show up with strange ones that I've never seen before – African, I think – and then I have to figure out how to transpose whatever-it-is into the piano/horn section arrangement I'm used to.

Look, their music is close enough to what I'd write anyway, so either they're some part of my subconscious or it's a huge supernatural coincidence – really, what are the chances? So either way I don't feel bad jotting down the songs. Besides, I started bringing my own little toy store carry-along keyboard and accompanying them. 'Course I keep the volume low so as not to wake up the little ones.

There's a jangle to the music of the dead. I mean that certain something that's so happy and so sad at the same time. The notes almost make a perfect harmony but don't. Then they do but quickly crash into dissonance. They simmer in that sweet in-between, rhythm section rattling along all the while. Chords collapse chaotically into each other, and just when you think it's gonna spill into total nonsense, it stands back up and comes through sweet as a lullaby on your mami's lips. Songs that'll make people tap their feet and drink melancholically but not realize the

twisting genius lurking within until generations later. That's the kind of music I make, and the dead do too. We make it together.

But tonight, the muertos didn't show up. They never scared me. If anything they kept me company in those wee hours. But this? This silence, made me shiver and feel both like I was being watched by a thousand unfriendly eyes and all alone in the world. I looked down that empty hallway. Tried to imagine my brand-new-long-lost friends making their shadowy way up towards me, but it remained empty.

Just to have something to do, I made the rounds. Each troubled young lump in its curled up spot. Some nights when I don't feel like doing my music, I read their files. Their twisted little sagas unwind through evaluation forms and concerned emails. Julio plays with himself at meal times. Devon isn't allowed near mirrors on the anniversary of his rape. Tiffany hides knives in case the faceless men come back for her. But night after night, they circle into themselves like those little curl-up bugs and drift off into sleep.

One bed, though, was empty. The cut out construction paper letters on the door spelled MARCOS. A little Ecuadorian kid, if I recall correctly. Untold horrors. Rarely speaks. The muertos being gone was bad in a supernatural, my immortal soul kind of way and Marcos being gone was bad in a frowning Nancy in the morning, lose my job kind of way, and I wasn't really sure which was worse. I turned and walked very quickly back down the hallway. First I spot-checked all the rooms I'd already passed just in case little man was crouching in one of the corners unnoticed. But I knew he wasn't. I knew wherever Marcos was, there would be a whole lot of swaying shrouds with him. Remember, I told you sometimes I just know stuff? This was

one of those things. Besides, I don't believe in coincidence. Not when kids and the dead are involved.

When I got to the end of the hallway, I stood still and just panted and sweated for a minute. That's when I heard the noise coming from one of the floors below. It was barely there, a ghost of a sound really, and kept fading and coming back. Like the little twinkling of a music box, far, far away.

To the untrained eye, I appear bumbling. You can see my blood vessels strain tight to support my girth. These hands are ungainly and callused. For a man who makes such heart-wrenching, subtle melodies, I am not delicate. But if you were to watch me in slow-mo, you would then understand that, really, I am a panther. A slow, overweight panther, perhaps, but still, there is a fluidity to me – a certain poise. I flowed, gigantic and cat-like, down the five flights of stairs to the lobby, pausing at each landing to catch my breath and check for signs of stroke or heart attack. Infarto, in Spanish, so that in addition to perhaps dying you have the added discomfort of it sounding like you were laid low by a stinky shot of gas.

The lobby is covered in posters that are supposed to make the children feel better about having been abused and discarded. Baby animals snuggle amidst watercolor nature drawings. It's a little creepy. The noise was still coming from somewhere down below, definitely the basement. I wasn't thrilled about this, was hoping the muertos had simply gathered in the lobby (perhaps to enjoy the inspirational artwork) but can't say I was surprised either. I opened the old wooden door that leads down the last flight of stairs and took a deep breath. Each step registered my presence unenthusiastically. At the bottom, I reached into the darkness 'til my hand swatted a dangling chain. The bulb was dim. It cast uneven light on a cluttered universe of broken furniture, file cabinets and forgotten papier-mâché projects.

I followed the noise through the shadows. I could now make it out definitively to be a melody; a lonely, minor key melody, beautiful like a girl with one eye standing outside a graveyard. I rounded a corner and then held perfectly still. Before me hovered all my friends, the muertos, with their backs turned to me. I tried to see past them but they were crowded together so densely it was impossible. Ever so quietly, I crept forward among them, their chilly undead shadows sending tiny earthquakes down my spine.

The muertos were gathered around a doorway. I entered and found myself in this dank boiler room. At the far end, little Marcos sat calmly in a niche of dusty pipes and wiring. He held my carry-along in his lap. His eyes were closed and his fingers glided up and down the keys. Between myself and Marcos, about thirty muertecitos bobbed up and down, their undivided attention on the boy. You know, I never think much about those who die as children, what their wandering souls must deal with. Who watches over them, checks on those small, curly-bug lumps at night? The ghost children were transfixed; I could feel their love for this boy and his music as surely as I felt the pulse pounding in my head.

And, to be quite honest with you, at first I too found myself lost in the swirling cascade of notes coming from my little keyboard. It is rare that I feel humbled, rarer still by a ten year old, but I'm not above admitting it. The song filled the heavy boiler room air, so familiar and so brand-new. It was a mambo, but laced with the saddest melody I've ever heard – some unholy union of Mozart, Coltrane and Perez Prado that seemed to speak of many drunken nights and whispered promises. It tore into me, devoured me and pieced me back together a brand new man.

But now the song has ended, breaking the quiet reverie we had all fallen into and ripping

open a great painful vacancy where it once had been. I'm strong, and not the addictive type, so I shake my head and welcome myself back to the strange silence. But the muertecitos are not so quick to move on. A furious rustling ripples through their ranks, and the small, illuminated shadows nudge towards Marcos. The boy finally looks up and turns to me, eyes wide. He starts to play the song again, but he's afraid now. His heart's not in it and the ghostlings can tell. They continue their urgent sway, a tough crowd, and begin to edge closer to him.

I carry a few saints with me and I find more often than not, they do their part. They tend to really come through when my more basic human instincts, like caution, fail. This is definitely one of those times. I surge (cat-like) through the crowd of wily young ghosts. Their cool tendrils cling to me like cobwebs but I keep moving. I scoop up little man and his living body feels so warm against me compared to all that death. He's still clutching the keyboard. Eyes squeezed shut. His little heart sends a pitter-patter pulse out like an SOS.

I decide if I pause to consider the situation around me, I may come to my senses, which would definitely mean an icy, uncomfortable death for myself and Marcos. So I make like a running back – fake left, swerve right (slowly, achingly, but gracefully) and then just plow down the middle. They're more ready for me this time, and angrier. The air is thick with their anger; any minute the wrong molecule might collide and blow the whole place up. Also, I didn't gain quite the momentum I'd hoped to. I can feel all that stillness reach far inside me, penetrate my most sacred places, throw webs across my inner shrines, detain my saints. I realize I might not make it.

But there is more music to write. I won't be around to see my legacy honored properly, but I have a few more compositions in me before I can sleep. Also, I enjoy my family and Saturday nights playing dominos with the band after rehearsal and my morning café con leche, bacon, eggs, papas fritas and sometimes sausage. Young Ernesto who's not so young and whatever crazy creation him and Janey will come up with in their late night house-rocking – there are still things

I would like to see. Also, this little fellow in my arms seems like he may have a long, satisfying career ahead of him. A little lonely perhaps, but musical genius can be an all-consuming friend until you know how to tame her. I have room under my wing here, I realize as I plow through this wee succubus riot, and many things to tell young Marcos. Practical things – things they don't teach you about in books or grad school.

Is trundle a word? It should be. I trundle through those creatures, tearing their sloppy ice tentacles from my body. The door comes up on me quicker than I thought it would, catches me a little off guard, and I'm so juiced-up thinking of all the beautiful and sad truths I will tell Marcos when we survive that I just knock it out of my way. I don't stop to see how the mama and papa muertos feel about the situation; I move through them quick.

At the corner I glance back. An intervention of some kind seems to be taking place. The muertos have encircled their young. I can only suppose what must be happening, but I'd like to believe it's a solid scolding, an ass beating like the one I would've gotten from Papi (God rest his troubled soul) if I'd trapped one of my younger brothers in the basement and made like I was gonna end him.

When we reach the c'mon-get-happy lobby, I notice that dawn is edging out onto the streets. Marcos's song must've been longer than I realized. I put the boy down, mostly because I'm losing feeling in the lower half of my body and my shirt is caked in sweat. Wrap my fat hand around the banister and slowly, languidly, huff and puff up the stairs behind him. I pause on the landing, listen to the quick, echoing tak-tak-tak of his footfalls bound up the next three flights. He will be curled in his bed by the time I reach the second floor, asleep by sunrise. At six, the morning crew will come in, smiles first, and I will chuckle with them nonchalantly about the long, uneventful night.

Tomorrow evening, as I show my new student a few tricks to keep his chops up, my friends will return. In their Sunday best, they will slither as always from the shadows of the fifth floor hallway. And this time, they will bring their young along with them.