MARTIN A RAMOS PUERTO RICO

THE WAY Of THE MACHETE

THE MACHETE

IT SURPRISED NO ONE, least of all the cane cutters of La Cuchilla, the day Juanito's father fought Scipio Armenteros, the town braggart and bully.

Scipio Armenteros towered over everyone in town, was the strongest worker and hardiest drinker. Tales were told about this man; for example, Scipio could drive nails through a board with his bare hands. He could lift a young bull on his shoulders and drink rum all day without losing consciousness. He could whip anybody in a fistfight – at arm wrestling, rum drinking or in a machete duel. There was talk that Scipio Armenteros had killed a man – served time in prison for it, too.

On the day that bully came to La Cuchilla, bad luck tagged along, slouching like a cowering dog.

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Josué Villafuerte said to his son, "Juan, will you go to the *colmado?"*

Standing on the porch of their house, the boy Juanito said, "What do you want, Papa?"

Josué gave his son a few reales. "Take the money. Go to the colmado and buy a pound of coffee, a dozen eggs, a pound of beans and three pounds of rice. Will you remember this?"

"Sí, Papa."

"Don't dally on the road," the man instructed in a firm tone. "Your mother needs the groceries right away."

"I won't," the boy assured him.

Juanito dressed plainly in baggy trousers and a homemade cotton shirt. He had skin the transparency of alabaster, in which blue veins stood prominent like tributaries. His achiote-red hair framed a face with deep-set brown eyes. And though he had a handsome face, with strong features and eyes moist like a puppy's, on it there was an expression of perpetual sadness.

The boy mounted Lucero, the year-old roan, one of two horses his father owned. He rode the horse bareback to the only grocery store in town by way of an unpaved road. It unwound for half a mile down and across the mountain slope where Juanito lived.

The morning air was cool upon the boy's skin. On another occasion he would detain his mount to savor the crisp country air with its fresh smells of dew on the tall grasses, wild marigold petals and flowering oak trees. He did notice something, however. In a clear patch of shimmering sky Juanito saw a buzzard gliding on updrafts, a sure sign of a dead or dying animal nearby.

When he finally arrived at the colmado, the boy dismounted and hitched Lucero to a post in front of the store. He saw other horses there – fine, impressive beasts with twitching flesh and flaring nostrils. The colmado was a modest structure: four walls of oaken boards, shuttered windows and a gabled roof made of zinc. The boards had been painted lime green, but the paint had since peeled, the roof red from rust.

Juanito liked to come here, either on errands or to buy candy.

He placed his foot on the front steps of the colmado and stopped. Coming from inside he heard booming laughter and voices like thunder. He recognized one voice, clearly above the rest: a deep, guttural basso – Scipio's voice. The boy hesitated. He had never seen the big man up close, remaining content to gaze at him from a distance, admiring the way Scipio cut cane, observant of every scythe-like swoosh and measured stroke of his machete.

Always Juanito had imagined the man looming as tall as a mountain, sweat-stained, imposing, dangerous. Someone to reckon with, consider and fear. More than a match for anyone, especially the cane cutters of La Cuchilla.

Inside the colmado the revelry increased like a crescendo. Juanito thought about returning home – now. But if he did, what could he tell Josué?

His mother needed the groceries to prepare the Sunday meal. That was a fact. She would surely punish him, for if Juanito failed to do this simple task, then the boy's father must go to the colmado. Josué would accept no excuses. And another fact, equally as important: Josué would not accept cowardice.

Hands shaking, the boy gritted his teeth and entered. He spotted the counter in front, the ceiling low, the gloom inside encroaching like an oppressive blanket. As if to strengthen his resolve, Juanito seized upon the odors of hanging smoked hams and beef, salted codfish and poultry feed in barrels. He saw pickled eggs in a huge open jar. And then an overpowering sensation of smells accosted him: cigar smoke and illegal rum. The latter – sweet, pungent – clung to his nostrils like sealing tar.

As the boy walked, the sawdust on the floor stuck to the soles of his bare feet, adding to his discomfort.

He counted four men in the colmado, smoking and drinking, their elbows leaning on the counter. The fifth man, wire-thin and hunched, labored wearily behind it. Juanito shuffled to the counter, clutching the coins in one hand as he grasped the waist of his pants with the other.

He recognized the tallest man there. No doubt about it, his sheer size gave him away. Scipio Armenteros.

From behind wire-rimmed glasses, the grocer leaned over the counter and said, "What do you want, Juanito?"

Head bowed, the boy said, "I w-want . . ."

He stammered, unable to complete the statement, and sweat scurried down his neck and back.

"Speak up," the grocer insisted.

"I--I want a p-pound of . . ."

"Say, Rosendo!" The grating voice of one of the men. "Serve us another round here. We're as thirsty as a dry well. Hurry up, hombre. Move that worthless old carcass."

The men drank straight rum out of tall glasses. Juanito guessed they would get drunk soon, if they weren't drunk already.

"In a minute," the grocer said. He turned to the boy. "Tell me what you want. You can see I'm busy today."

Juanito gulped, took a deep breath and mentioned quickly and without stammering the four grocery items Josué had asked him to get and in the exact amounts.

The grocer said, "You're such a smart boy. I'll have the groceries for you right away."

Though Rosendo said it with a crooked smile, Juanito didn't smile, his lips pursed and hands sweaty. He kept thinking that if he were to look up, where he wasn't invited, something bad might happen. What exactly he dared not guess. Just something... unexpected.

Juanito waited. He bit his lower lip and felt like a bird trapped in a cage, eager for escape or release. He stared at the floor and grasped the coins tighter, until his palm ached. In spite of the tension he sensed in the hollow of his stomach, he craved a closer look at Scipio Armenteros. To see for himself what all the brag was about. He dared not look or make a sound, however, for fear of what these men – especially Scipio – might say or do. Just let the sweat collect upon his nose and upper lip and scurry like mice down his neck and the middle of his back.

Rosendo hurried with the groceries, which he brought in a paper bag. Juanito took the bag and paid. The grocer gave him change.

"Gracias," Juanito said, and started on his way.

"Boy. Yes, you."

Though they had been spoken normally, with no hint of aggression or meanness, the words exploded in Juanito's ears like thunderclaps. No mistaking it. Scipio Armenteros had uttered those words, his voice undeniably menacing.

"Turn around. Come here. I want a word with you."

Juanito turned. Though his legs felt like tree stumps, he dared not disobey. He moved.

"I've seen you around. You're Josué Villafuerte's son, aren't you?"

"S-sí," Juanito said, his voice a flutter.

"I want you to tell your papa you met me in town. Know who I am, boy?"

"S--Scipio A--Armenteros." He pronounced the name, head bowed.

"True. Tell your papa the cane cutters have told me about his reputation. Tell him I am good with the machete. The best. Tell him I want to see him, and that if he doesn't come to the colmado today, I'll tell the men he is a coward." Scipio leaned closer, his breath a pungent mix of cigar smoke and rum. "Understand, boy? A coward."

"S-sí," Juanito blurted. "I understand."

"Look at me, boy. I won't bite."

Silence. The boy raised his head and gazed squarely, without flinching, upon Scipio's brooding face.

"That's better. Am I so ugly that you can't bear the sight of me?"

"No, señor."

"Good. You look like a smart boy. Go tell Josué Villafuerte what I said. Every word. I'll wait for him here."

Juanito breathed, turned and ran. He almost dropped the bag of groceries as he bolted past the door and out.

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The ride home seemed to go on forever, the road burdensome like a stretched brown ribbon with no end in sight.

Juanito could not get the man's physical dimensions, the grotesque features of Scipio's face, out of his mind. His face was not unlike the mask of the carnival demon or *vejigante:* square on top and low-browed, unwashed and unshaved. The bulbous nose hung pendulous over a pair of fleshy lips. The ears protruded forward like swinging doors. The mustache curled menacingly at each corner like a scorpion's sting. And the hair, plastered to his head, looked matted and dirty like an old mop. Finally a two-inch scar crossed Scipio's left cheek at a diagonal.

Though ugly enough to scare the bejesus out of a boy in broad daylight, Scipio's face was not his most disturbing feature. Juanito thought: his *eyes.* Set wide apart, their whites red from habitual drinking, Scipio's eyes seemed to explode from his face with a piercing blue luster that had struck fear into the boy's heart and jumbled his emotions.

The expression in Scipio's eyes – it harbored something evil.

Then the boy recalled another detail, no less important than the rest: Scipio's machete, honed and unused, its blade painted a dull red, leaning against the counter menacingly. In the hamlet the machete was both a tool and a weapon, and there was always the rumor of a fight.

Juanito figured that's what it would amount to – a fight – if he told his father that Scipio Armenteros waited for him in the colmado with an ornery disposition and a sharpened, unused machete. But the boy must tell because the braggart had called Josué Villafuerte a coward.

And nobody ever did that. Not in La Cuchilla, the hamlet known as "The Knife."

"Go in the house and fetch my machete," Josué instructed his son, "and a spade."

"What?" Juanito asked, bewildered.

"Just do what I say. Go."

Juanito went.

Dolores, the boy's mother, asked, "Why do you want the machete, Josué? Today is Sunday."

She stood on the porch of their two-room shanty, a young but frail-looking woman wearing a mended calico dress. She had loose coal-black hair and mesmerizing jade green eyes.

No hint of nerves showing, Josué looked sternly at his wife. "He challenged me, the fool. He wanted to test my courage. The cane cutters have bragged about me, told him I can fight. They always brag."

"You mean that man, Scipio Armenteros?"

Josué nodded.

"Surely you won't fight him?"

Josué straightened. "We had words. There were men there, *braceros* and other field hands, some of the landowners as well. Scipio said if I didn't fight him I wasn't macho. I told him I could fight him and win. No brag; it's a fact." He paused, breathed. "Dolores, I'm no coward."

Dolores's eyes moistened. She wiped them with the back of her hand. When she spoke, her words were pregnant with apprehension. "You'll fight this man? He's bigger and stronger. Folks in town say Scipio killed a man. He'll kill you, Josué."

"Maybe. But maybe I can kill him first. He has never seen me wield the machete. If I kill him it will be in self-defense."

"How will we live without you?" Dolores protested. "The *zafra* will start soon. Who will cut the cane? Who will put food on the table?"

Josué placed a hand on her shoulder. "Juanito's almost a man. He's strong, reliable and hard-working. He will cut the cane."

"But—"

"Don't worry, *mujer.* I'll be all right."

Before Dolores could answer, the boy came lugging his father's machete and a spade. He gave each to his father, and waited.

Josué thanked the boy. He stared into his eyes and said, "While I'm away, I charge you with care of the house. Look after your mother and sister. You have much courage for someone so young. I know I can depend on you."

"Don't worry, Papa. I'll look after them."

"I know you will, Juan."

Juanito felt proud because only his father called him Juan, a man's name. Everyone else said Juanito.

"Adiós," Josué said.

"Adiós," said the boy, watching his father leave and wondering if he were saying goodbye to him for the last time.

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Juanito worried. Inside the house his baby sister cried, probably wanting to be suckled. Or maybe she too had noticed Josué's prolonged absence. Dolores said nothing, which Juanito thought was odd. He waited on the porch, staring at the deepening shadows and yellowing sky.

Not a leaf fluttered or blade twitched; no nocturnal animals scurried. And only the baby voiced its discomfort.

"What do you think is happening?" Juanito asked. "Think they will fight?"

Dolores came and stood in the open door, framed like a Madonna with the infant cradled in her arms. She shook her head, sniffled.

"I don't know. I try not to think of anything bad happening."

"It's getting late. And Papa hasn't come home."

"Josué said that man, Scipio Armenteros, challenged him to a fight. He said Scipio didn't consider him macho."

The boy scratched his shaggy hair, picked a blade of grass from his shirt. "Scipio's always challenging someone. He likes to brag. Boy, does he like to brag."

"I worry every time your papa leaves the house with the machete. Even when he goes off to work. I worry he might come home maimed, or worse. If Scipio called him a coward, Josué will fight. Your papa doesn't brag."

"I know," Juanito said. "He left me in charge of the house. He told me to look after you and the baby. And I will."

Dolores smiled. "You have courage. A proud and brave little boy, in a man's world."

"Why would he take a spade with him this time, Mama?"

"I don't know." She bowed her head, her eyes again moist. "He has never taken one before."

Juanito noticed her concern. "Mama, I'm going into town to look for Papa. I'll take the other horse."

Dolores cuddled the baby. "Be careful, Juanito," she said as he left. "I don't want to lose you too."

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Like a dying ember the sun had begun to smolder beyond the cordillera by the time Juanito rode his father's mare into town. He asked at the colmado and Rosendo told him Josué Villafuerte and Scipio Armenteros went to the ravine to fight a duel.

Duel.

The boy did not recognize the word, disliked its sound but was certain of its meaning, because by analogy and implication the word must surely mean a fight.

Riding at a gallop, Juanito arrived at the ravine and saw the cane cutters there, an excited but disciplined throng.

He dismounted and approached, felt his feet sink into the soft soil of the ravine, his heart racing like a wild stallion's. Rippling water sounds greeted him, and on the branching trees the leaves rustled like doves taking flight. The tall elephant grass yielded, verdant and pliant, to the onslaught of the cooling breeze.

Strange, sinister: the wind brought with it the peculiar taint of blood. The odor struck with such force, Juanito almost reeled from it. Then the smell began to blend with the scent of water, as the men – speaking in hushed tones – parted on either side like a wave, breaching a path for him.

Juanito didn't believe he would find his father dead. Other people died, the *abuelos* or old people especially, but not his father. Then he saw and believed what his mind had rebelled against. His knees buckled but, like an obedient soldier, he irrevocably advanced, unwilling to permit the full force of the spectacle to weaken his reserve or dampen his resolve.

The fight had been wild, wicked and terrible. The boy had never seen so much spilt blood – it was everywhere, on the ground, on the grasses, on tree trunks – except during Christmas when pigs were slaughtered.

He had wondered why Josué had carried the spade. Now he knew. The men had used the spade to dig two adjacent holes in the loose soil of the ravine. Once stripped of his shirt, each combatant had climbed into his hole, filling it with soil so that it impeded movement from the waist down.

Seeing this now, the boy could not help but admire his father's seriousness. There was no joke in that man. Josué Villafuerte would never back down from a fight. Neither did he permit – once challenged – his adversary to do so. Either the challenger would feel intimidated and leave, or else he must fight.

The fight had been a contest to the death, a *pelea* of mythic proportions. No escape or retreat asked for and none given.

From the amount of blood staining the ground next to the body, and because his torso lay splayed as if in crucifixion, Juanito concluded that the braggart died first. Wounds and slashes were cut like roads deep into his flesh. Both of Scipio's

ears, his nose and his left hand were severed. Even his head had come close to decapitation. The "O" of his mouth, filling with flies, appeared frozen in awe, and the lifeless eyes – their intense glow now extinguished – stared vacantly at the fading sky.

The weapon, Scipio's machete (plaintive and supplicant, pointing outward), rested next to his body.

Then Juanito looked at Josué, and saw his father's body had not been mutilated as badly, though it too had shed its butcher's bucket of blood. Scipio's blows, mighty enough to fell the thickest cane, had severed Josué's right ear and three of the fingers on his left hand but neither of his appendages. Multiple cuts and stab wounds, like war medals, adorned his father's arms and chest.

Juanito couldn't help but marvel at the sight he saw next: Josué's blood-soaked arm whose hand had somehow held on to the machete.

The machete. Juanito took the blade from his father's hand and regarded his well-defined and clean-shaven face. Rake-thin and wiry-muscled, Josué Villafuerte had been compelled to fight against impossible odds. So that only a fighter with raw nerve, metal fiber and undaunted courage could have finished Scipio off, or died trying.

Juanito's father was such a man.

The boy moved away from that scene without stumbling or shaking, with poise and as straight as an uncut stalk of Caribbean cane. He wanted to cry but didn't. Time enough for that at the wake, and later at the funeral. Time to think, also to remember. The cane cutters would respect him more – now that he had unwittingly enlisted into their ranks – if he bridged the tragedy with composure, courage and *cordura*. They would also see to the cadavers.

The boy looked at the machete. It had blood on it, Scipio's blood. No doubt Josué's precious blood on it as well.

The boy used a leaf from a banana tree and wiped the residue of blood from the machete's cutting blade. He noticed that its edge had hardly dulled, all 24 inches of steel honed clean, right up to the handle. He considered the machete, this tool which had served his father and his father's father before him. It would serve him.

Machete in hand, Juan mounted his mare and headed for home.

THE WAY

Not long after his father's funeral, when Juan Villafuerte turned 13, he spoke with the landowner to ask for his father's job. He carried with him the same machete Josué Villafuerte had used to kill Scipio Armenteros, which the boy had taken from his father's blood-soaked hand.

Had the hacendado not witnessed the duel, he might have refused the boy's request. But everyone in town – especially those who had seen two grown men fight to the death in the ravine – believed it to have marked a turning point, a watershed, in La Cuchilla. For important events since that day were referred to as occurring before or after "la pelea," The Fight. So the landowner agreed, and in this way Juan went to work in the same sugar cane fields as his father before him.

There were other boys working there, but most lugged water or carried food for the peons, while the really young ones were no doubt truants from school. Juan left school to work in the fields of Caribbean cane, and almost immediately regretted it.

Sun, sweat, sores: such was the crucible in which the cane cutters were forged. Even for mature men, no strangers to hardship and death, it was hard work. No less so for Juan.

Only two hours into the job blisters began to appear like blooming roses on Juan's hands. Cuts, too, which itched from contact with the blades of grass as he swung the machete. After a while the heat and humidity became insufferable. It was then he began to consider the task he had set for himself to be an inexorable burden not fit for boy or beast.

Dizzying was the sight of uncut cane, extending like a sea of gold in every direction. And the smell of ashes and burnt stalks permeated everywhere. He felt sweat ooze from his pores, salty when it reached his tongue and mouth. The sweat soaked his pants and stained his cotton shirt. Even the soles of his booted feet sweated.

On a clear patch of ground, under the canopy of an old mango tree, Juan wiped the sweat from his brow and rested.

One of the workers saw him sitting there and said, "Are you okay, boy? Want water?"

When Juan nodded, the cane cutter – a bronzed skin veteran of many zafras, his face weathered from the tropic sun – motioned for one of the water carriers to come forward. A barefoot boy brought Juan water. Juan took the ladle offered, dipped it into the pail, and drank.

"Not too much," the cane cutter cautioned him, "unless you want a bellyache."

Juan returned the ladle and thanked the boy. The water carrier smiled, two front teeth missing, and scurried in search of another thirsty throat to quench.

In a no-nonsense tone, the cane cutter said, "Better get back to work. It isn't midday yet, and you haven't laid out much cane. Won't do to let the *capataz* see you slacking."

"Sí, señor," Juan said.

The man helped the boy to his feet, then left.

Enthralled, Juan watched the more experienced men cut cane. He noticed they worked with the precision of a well-oiled machine, swinging their machetes without wasted motion, letting the cane fall in neat piles where it would later be picked up and carted to the mill for grinding.

Though it wouldn't be easy, Juan realized he must learn to work this way.

The late morning sun was always a factor. Its rays scorched the boy's head even through the woven straw of his hat. As if it were alive, the air pulsated with the sun's heat, and everything shimmered: the cane, the machetes, the bowl of blinding sky. The glare was great. Though he wanted them to move, Juan's feet felt rooted to the earth and would not budge. So how could he cut cane? From where would he get the strength and resources?

Conscious of the burden fate had decreed, aware of the responsibility he must bear (his own, and two other mouths to feed), Juan wanted to work but couldn't. His hands were sore, his limbs ached, and his heart beat as if it would burst in his chest. He shaded his eyes and gazed at the sun, heavy and oppressive overhead.

The golden stalks swayed. The air vibrated. He felt faint. So he lay on the ground, in the shade, and soon dreamt.

In his delirium Juan saw a ripe field of cane, stretched out like burnished metal, ready for the harvester's hand. He saw two men in that field, fighting a duel to the death. One man, in his baggy trousers and rolled-up shirt, he recognized easily as Josué Villafuerte. The other man, who looked taller and heftier, had to be Josué's nemesis: the daunting Scipio Armenteros.

The men brandished their knives and wielded them like swords, sparks flying each time the machetes clashed. It was a haunting vision, provocative. Juan had never witnessed a machete fight, even in the hamlet of La Cuchilla where knife dueling was common fare.

The boy cheered for his father, but wondered how the man could possibly win. He knew fighting was useless because Scipio was stronger and meaner and had already killed a man. The duelers clashed – steel against steel – until something eerie happened. For no apparent reason the men ceased fighting and used their machetes to cut cane instead. They looked in Juan's direction, and encouraged him with hand signals to follow in their wake.

At first the boy was puzzled. Could they be asking him to join the fight, or cut cane? They waved persistently, and finally he understood what they meant. Both Scipio and Josué wanted him to fight, not give up: to cut cane.

Juan woke, refreshed. An unexpected breeze had dried his sweat. His limbs no longer ached, and his heart felt calm in his chest. Later he would eat what his mother had prepared, finish work, go home and rest. He understood what he must do; his fate need not be questioned.

The will to work came from his heart as well as his head. Josué Villafuerte and Scipio Armenteros had shown him the way of the machete: that the wielded blade could give life, as well as take it. Courage would come, day by day, with each stalk of fallen cane.

Juan Villafuerte raised his machete, blade catching the bright sun, and he cut cane.

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