

The Moment of Grace

Curt Eriksen

José woke with a start from a dream in which his old man was screaming into his face again. His old man was drunk and raving, throwing his weight around, clearing the kitchen table with a sweep of his short stubby arms. “Coward!” he bellowed. “Coward!”

José’s eyes were wide open and he stared at the water stain on the ceiling but he could still see that ugly vein in his old man’s temple, thick as a worm. The one that had finally burst.

It was the blind woman, Ascención, who had warned José to beware of an omen like this. And she had been quite specific: “The day you see your father again, you don’t take no chances.”

José crossed himself twice and after the second kiss he rubbed his right wrist with his left hand. The swelling had gone down, but it still hurt. But not nearly so much as the disgrace of that first estocada, when the sword struck the shoulder blade and warped with his whole weight behind it. José had tried again and again, he had tried to kill the bull until the cushions were raining down upon him. Then Pedro stepped in, apologizing under his breath as he stooped to neatly sever the spinal chord with the puntilla.

José clenched his fist and swore to himself that he would show his old man what he could do. He kicked off the sheet and swung his legs out of the bed, the springs dipping noisily to cup his buttocks.

The empresario had slipped away during the fight and they had left without being paid, traveling through the heat of the afternoon to sleep in a dive like this. José was too tired when they got there to notice much. Now he took in the crack in the window and the grimy aluminum frame, the bulb speckled with fly shit hanging from a pair of twisted wires in the middle of the ceiling and the plaster peeling in bubbling scabs off two of the walls.

The feria was another small local affair, but they had to take what they could get.

“Gidup,” José shouted.

And hearing his own voice trouble the calm of his partners’ sleep he saw himself again, standing there in the kitchen in his underwear. The tiles were icy under his feet and his legs shook so violently he could barely stand. His chest was heaving and the cold midnight air burned in his lungs. His old man’s knuckles were bloodied and his mom lay crumpled on the floor behind him, moaning softly. When his old man told him to get out of the way José said, “No.”

After that there was no turning back.

José shifted his weight with the creaking of the springs and stretched a lean white leg to dig his toes into the back of the man lying on the floor nearest to him. Still, he had never understood what *he* had done to make his old man so angry and bitter. So bitter he drowned in his own bile

Moya grunted and José dug his toes in again, harder this time. Moya rolled away from the foot, pressing Pedro against the wall.

Pedro mumbled, “Git off me,” and he tried to push him away but Moya was heavier than he was.

“You two look like a pair a faggots,” said José. “Gidup, let’s go.”

Moya lifted his head and glared at José. His eyes were almost black and they narrowed and smoldered when his pride was challenged. But he lacked the courage necessary to stand up to any animal more powerful than he was. Now he drew the sheet over his head and muttered, “Ah, fuck off.”

Pedro squirmed out between Moya and the wall and sat up at the foot of the mattress. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Time to git out a here.” José stood up. “This place is no good.”

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There were two bars in the village and they sat at the one that was shaded in the morning by the sagging roof of the arcade. Moya and Pedro sugared their coffees but José took his black. They sat on bright red plastic chairs at a red plastic table advertising a brand of beer that reminded José of his old man. The glare off the plaza made it difficult to see, but there wasn't much to look at anyway.

The plaza was ringed by bars and shops, most of which were boarded up. The fountain in the middle of the plaza was dry. It was another tobacco town, the sort of place you'd miss if you blinked as you drove through it, which is what they had done. The highway cutting across the valley became a main street lined by regimental housing and dusty acacia trees, everything made of cement and hollow brick brushed with whitewash, an apparition in the headlights of the van. Moya had driven to the other end before Pedro told him to stop. "I think this is it," he said.

In the fifties whole families were relocated here, but now they were leaving or gone already. That was something José could understand. Extremadura had always been a land of emigrants. Any poor man with a little sense would move on rather than starve. His old man had walked to France and after a week of picking grapes he'd turned around and walked back and said that was it, he'd rather starve. But instead of starving he bummed what he could off his brother and ruined both their lives.

"I thought there'd be a bit more action this time," said Moya. He was dark enough to pass for a gypsy and about as trustworthy. With a slender nose and a high forehead emphasized by the way he pulled his long curly hair back and knotted it behind his head, he considered himself irresistibly attractive. "Maybe a bit a 'tang, somethin' to chew on."

"Dream on," said Pedro, who was not only lighter than Moya but pale as well, tending to freckle and burn in the sun.

"We didn't come here lookin' for women," said José. He wasn't any older than either of them but he was the one who took the most chances.

Moya shooed a fly from his face with a wave of his hand and said, “I usta think the women’d come lookin’ for us.”

“That’s a joke,” said Pedro, who still hadn’t been laid. That time in the roadhouse he froze when he had his chance. He was doing fine so long as José stood beside him at the bar and coaxed him along. But as soon as José left with that little Rumanian girl Pedro lost his nerve.

“In a dump like this,” he mused.

They never talked about making it big any more. They knew how unlikely that was. José’s cape work wasn’t bad and he was daring, but he was already twenty-one. And no one was taking notice of him.

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They were supposed to meet the empresario at noon. When the waiter returned with the change José asked him where the church was.

““Hind the plaza.”

So they went there. It was a squat building no higher than any other house. It would have been built by the prison crews at the time the town was raised. They had added a steeple which, rather than taper to a point, ended abruptly where the tower narrowed to four bricks. A pair of storks had built a nest up there.

It was hot in the sun but the thick walls of the church, built of granite hauled from the sierra, kept the heat out. That’s what José liked best, how cool it was inside. It reminded him of the tool shed behind his uncle’s house. That’s where he used to go after things had calmed down, once his old man had passed out. The shed was shaded by a massive oak tree his uncle had left standing on the edge of the olive grove. José’s old man had told him he was a fool not to cut it down. “You can sell the wood or burn it yourself, it don’t matter.” But his uncle had left it standing there.

Moya hated the insides of churches. The cold stone slabs under his feet, the gloom, oppressed him. He knew that none of this made any difference and it felt too much like a useless

obligation, but he went along with it anyway. They were still a team and as an act of solidarity he dipped his fingers into the saucer screwed into the wall and crossed himself. Then he sat down and sprawled on a pew in the last row and wished he were somewhere else.

Pedro followed José up to the altar. The church was simple and unadorned, which was the way he liked it. Other than a lectern set upon a wrought iron pulpit composed of filigreed motifs representing the fourteen stations of the cross, there were no icons at all. Pedro thought it was odd, but comforting, since he preferred a faceless conception of that which can't be named anyway.

But José was at a loss. He needed an image, something tangible that he could address when requesting a favor or proving his valor. He had always been fascinated by the weeping Virgins and the bleeding Christs: what was a life without sorrow and shame, without the drama of suffering? All he'd ever seen were men and women slaving their lives away, doing what they had to do and breaking their bodies and spirits in the process, growing old sometimes before they died. Drinking themselves stupid.

José was determined not to end up like that. He had decided long ago, while he sat huddled in the tool shed, that he would not grow old and embittered. Instead he would embrace the darkest secret of life. He was certain that death would come for him when he least expected it.

But he knew he could never be ready for it, just as he was never ready the moment the bull charged. That moment of grace was something no man could prepare for. It was going to happen whether you liked it or not and when it came at you all you could hope to do was stand there with your feet firmly planted and face it with your eyes wide open. "Don't blink," that's what his uncle used to tell him. It was something his old man never understood: that it is one thing to talk about bulls and quite another to be in the ring.

Of course José's old man could never admit to his fear of the horns. He liked to stand around the corral and lean on the fence while José practised with his uncle, telling both of them

what they had to do. He was usually drunk by then. Once he climbed inside and wrestled the cape from his son. The yearling had taken enough passes by then and was already getting wise. José stood back and watched it charge and lift his old man up and over its back. The fall broke three of his old man's ribs. But it was the look on his face as he lay there writhing on the ground, the vacant terrified expression in his eyes, that José could never forgive.

It was a look so unlike the blinding rage that came upon him when he crossed the threshold of his home and became the king of the castle. José remembered his dream, and Ascención's warning. She had been right before and he didn't doubt that she would be right this time. But he couldn't step in the ring without taking a chance. Someone like Moya could do that, but he couldn't do it. And neither could Pedro.

José turned to look at his friend. As boys they had been inseparable and Pedro had followed him into this dead-end as well. But then Pedro would follow him anywhere. In the dim light that leaked through the window of the empty church José could see the lost and dreamy expression in Pedro's eyes. And José knew again that Pedro should never have taken a cape in his hands. And that certainty, which was not new, scared the hell out of him now.

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Once he was in the sun again, José kept walking. Pedro was moving fast too, kicking up gravel and glancing over his shoulder at Moya who lagged behind like a sulking child. Moya was still chewing on the toothpick he'd stuck in his teeth when they left the bar, and that made Pedro despise him all the more. He knew something was wrong, but he didn't know what it was. "Wait," he called again, but José had already entered the plaza.

He crossed it in long determined strides, the muscles in his legs flexing. José could smell the dust in the fountain and a whiff of something else, pungent and wrong, a carcass rotting in the heat somewhere. Now that he knew what the choice was, he studied this choice in his mind's eye with a cold detachment that made him aware of how much he was sweating.

When he got to the house where they had slept he nodded to the owner, who was sweeping dry leaves and grit away from the door and over the curb. The pins in her hair, the bald patches and nap fuzzing into little balls on her yellow dressing gown, the men's slippers with their scruffy foam rubber soles, the skin of her face and hands, leathered and coppery from the work in the fields—it left him breathless.

“Mornin’,” she called after him, stopping to lean on the broom and stare into the hallway where José had disappeared. She had a son of her own doing his military stint in Madrid. She shook her head and sighed and just as she started sweeping again the other two arrived, the last one sauntering up and spitting the shredded half of a toothpick into the street.

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They met the empresario at the bar where the shade was already slipping under the arcade, and he explained to them how to get there. He said he'd be there by the time it started but, swiping a fluff of poplar seed that had settled on the shoulder of his navy blue polyester jacket, he had to do something else just now.

“And our share?”

José didn't want to think about Pedro, he forced himself instead to wonder where the poplars were, but he held this man he'd known for years with eyes that had stared down greater danger than this before.

The empresario put his sunglasses on and looked away across the plaza where a boy was kicking a stone against the fountain. He told José not to worry about that. They'd settle after it was over.

Moya cleared his throat and shifted his weight in his chair, but he didn't say anything. He pulled another toothpick out of the little plastic barrel that sat in the center of the table and considered again the option of taking a loan against a truck and doing what his dad and his granddaddy before him had done. There wasn't any glory in carting traffic, but there was plenty of steady work.

José said they needed something now. “We barely got enough ‘tween us to fill the tank.”

The empresario made a big show of being offended, waving his hands and saying, “What d’ya think I’m some two bit gypsy that don’t know what’s right an’ wrong? This business is a bitch and you boys know it. Who’s gonna *pay* to watch you dance round an animal’s too old to fuck anymore?”

José knew he was right but he didn’t say a word and he didn’t look anywhere else either. The empresario lit a cigarette and didn’t bother where the smoke blew. He leaned across the table and hissed, “You boys know how lucky you are, right? There’s plenty a kids’d pay to get this chance. Just to walk out there with a cape slung over their arm. You know what I’m sayin’?”

José knew, but that didn’t change anything. He had to get some of the cost, it wasn’t even summer yet.

The empresario vaguely recalled the first time he had seen José, that day he jumped into the ring in Badajoz. José was twelve then, long and skinny and quick on his feet and the empresario thought there might be something in it for him. He flicked the cigarette into the plaza and changed tactics, removing his sunglasses with one hand and, sticky as popsicle melt, assuring them once again that they were going to make it. With his free hand he reached inside his jacket and drew out some crumpled bills. “You’ll see,” he said, tossing them onto the table.

Pedro picked the money up and straightened each bill, silently moving his lips as he counted them one by one, adding it all up in his head. José and Moya and the empresario stood up and Moya listened carefully to the directions again, trying to imagine what it might be like, whether there’d be any loose country women once it was all over.

“I keep rememberin’ how much your daddy believed in you,” said the empresario, who had never even met José’s old man. It was his uncle he was thinking of, the one who had taken his own life when the bank foreclosed, preferring to hang by his belt from the branch of the oak tree he still owned rather than face the cold accusation in his wife’s homeless eyes.

“That’s somethin’ you oughta remember.”

The empresario put his sunglasses on and swaggered away.

José and Moya watched him go.

“What’s it to him?”

José looked at Moya, who would never know.

“Let’s git outa here,” he said.

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They followed a narrow highway of bleached asphalt crumbling into lumpy pancakes of tar and gravel at either edge where it’d been spread too thin. The irrigation canal ran along the south side of the road but there was no water flowing through it. Beyond the wide cement channel, raised on cinder blocks whenever the road dipped, they could see the tobacco seedlings planted in dizzy lines all the way to the river. That’s where the poplars grew. A eucalyptus wood banked the north side of the road, some of the leaf browning already.

“That bastard’s gonna get it,” muttered Moya. He raised his black eyes and stared into the rear view mirror. “You sure you counted good, Pedro?”

“I can count,” was all Pedro said.

José listened to the drone of the engine and the wind beating through the windows. He could see the profile of the sierra through clearings in the eucalyptus wood, hazy and leaden in the far distance. He tried to reassure himself with the thought that wherever they were going they had been there before, and chances are they would all return again.

“What we gonna eat tonight?” Moya snarled. “That’s what I wanna know.”

He reached to turn on the radio before he remembered that they’d lost it in Trujillo, when the lock was forced by a screwdriver the thieves had left on the driver’s seat in their panic to get away. The radio was as old as the van itself and they listened to more static than music on it but still it was something.

Pedro sat alone on the backseat. He looked out the side window and watched a hawk reel above the fields. The way it bent the long tawny feathers at the tips of each wing to navigate the current made him think of José's hands when he held the cape before the first charge.

Pedro was still bothered by what had happened, not so much the money, but that thing that had slithered down his back in the church. He kept telling himself it was nothing, which is what José'd said. He had smiled and placed a hand on Pedro's shoulder. "You're always first to git the jitters." But Pedro didn't think it was that. Not this time.

"There's the dead oak," shouted Moya. "Least the bastard got his directions right."

José looked at the great tree with its blanched leafless limbs standing at the head of the T. "Don't cast much shade anymore," he muttered.

Moya slowed down and turned north onto a road that was even narrower than the one they'd been following. He was hunched over the steering wheel, thinking about the trucks again, about owing the bank for the rest of his life, when he saw it crawl out of the ditch. He sat up and as he shifted gears and accelerated he saw that it was a kitten with spindly legs and mangy patches of fur, as hungry and lost as he was. The kitten stood by the side of the road and hunkered down to watch the van grow large before it turned and started scurrying back to the ditch. Moya gripped the steering wheel and whipped it, feeling the thump in the palms of his hands. But he couldn't pull the van back onto the road in time.

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The ditch was shallow and the only damage was the tire that blew. Moya kept cussing in every direction while Pedro got the jack out and José found some stones to set behind the wheels. "Who's gonna pay for this, eh?" Moya kicked the tire Pedro had taken off. It was ripped open and smeared with cat gut. "And that spare?" He laughed, but it was a mean humorless laugh. "It's balder 'an your asshole."

"Least mine's movin,'" said Pedro. "If it was up to you, we'd never get there."

"Hey, now that's an idea! Damn clever of you too, Pedro."

José looked up at Moya and said, “Whyn’t you help us get this on here?”

“Pedro’s right you, know, we oughta just blow it off. What’s in it for us?”

Moya stood there without moving and José knew he was right. His old man was long gone, there was nothing to prove any more, why carry on? Especially when Ascención had warned him not to take a chance. Why risk it?

But didn’t this happen every time? It was only the jitters. Fear and superstition were a matador’s creed. He lived by it and José knew that he had to die by it as well. There was no turning back.

“Put that tire away,” he said.

Moya looked down at him and sneered.

“What for?”

José stood up and wiped his hands on his pants.

“Cause we got a job to do.”

“Yeah,” Moya spit on the tire, “a job that don’t pay.”

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From a hilltop they could see the ring in a hollow surrounded by the big red brick tobacco barns. A long line of parked cars gleaming in the sunlight bordered either side of the road that led through the drying sheds and into the hollow, where a crowd was scattered around the ring.

José looked at his watch. It took them fifteen minutes to change the tire and another fifteen to rock the van out of the ditch. He had wondered whether the spare would hold and the fact that it did was an affirmation that settled his nerves a little.

Moya drove the van down the hillside and began to make his way through the long corridor of cars. He was cautious of the couples and families and gangs of boys and girls moving along the dirt road. Now that they had arrived he felt triumphant and certain that he would find what he was looking for.

At the turn into the hollow the crowd thickened and Moya wanted to honk the horn but he knew he shouldn't do that. A woman with heavy hips leading a little girl by the hand felt the van edging up close behind her and she said something to a man walking right in front of them. He looked over his shoulder and saw José in his mud brown corto and shouted, “At's them.”

A shudder ran through the crowd and people moved either way in front of the van which spun its wheels searching for traction on a powdery hump of the track that led to the ring.

José looked at the sweaty faces that seemed so familiar, the eyes wide and direct with curiosity, the missing teeth. Most of them were wearing their Sunday best but their fancy clothes looked wilted in the heat.

The barns closest to the ring had been converted into make-shift bars and men with plastic cups of beer in their hands were gathered in front of the portable coolers and kegs. Someone shouted “¡Me cago en la leche!” It was the guttural sound of the man's voice that made José's pulse quicken.

“What's the matter?”

José turned to look at Pedro, who was sitting on the edge of his seat, leaning forward between he and Moya. That's when José knew for sure it would be him.

“What's wrong, José?”

Pedro had never seen anything like it in José: the look in his eyes, it looked might have been fear. But a fear so filled with tenderness and regret that it made that thing creep down Pedro's spine again. He wanted to touch José, but he was afraid to do it.

“Outa the way,” Moya shouted, pounding on the horn, as he maneuvered the van to park beside the truck.

The crowd surged and collapsed around them but before they got down and stepped into it each of them glanced at the boxcar where the bull was waiting.

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The man in charge, the one the others called Su Señoria, was as drunk as the rest of them. The beer on his breath and the acrid sweat—this man, who could have been José's old man, led the three of them and a train of sycophants around the ring which was unlike anything José had ever seen before. Even the burladeros were built out of cinder blocks and there was no sand, just hard tamped earth with woody weeds growing wherever they could sink a tap root. José kicked one of these with the heel of his boot; they might not tangle their feet and trip over it.

The man in charge raised an arm in a proprietary gesture to indicate the natural amphitheater formed by the hollow. Picnics were laid out under beach umbrellas and families sat under these on colorful blankets. The women were already serving lunch to the smallest children. There were no seats and people either stood or sat on top of the cinder block wall with their legs hanging into the ring.

There were a pair of holding stalls on the other side and some boys were trying to lower a couple of rusty iron gates into the grooves that sealed the chutes. But neither of the gates seemed to fit and the boys were banging on them with logs that only dented the curlicue the iron smith had adorned each gate-top with.

The man parading them about the ring stooped with a grunt to pick up a crumpled beer can and said, "Wanna see 'im?"

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José could smell the animal before he could make its shape out in the light that filtered through the slits between the planks. The tang of dung, dust and fur and the dark tremendous breathing always filled him with the same sense of awed humility.

The bull smelled him too. Suddenly knowing that José was there it snorted and stumbled to crash against the side of the boxcar, making the truck rock on its springs.

Someone blew a blow-horn, the sort that are used at football matches.

"See anything?" asked Moya.

"Take a look."

José stepped back and let Moya peer into the box.

“What’s wrong with him?” Moya asked the man who had been showing them around the ring.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with ‘im.”

The man drew up to his full height, but he couldn’t meet the intensity in José’s eyes.

“Too old, ‘at’s all.”

“Can’t see the horns,” said Moya, making way for Pedro.

“You count the rings?” he said to the man.

“What rings?”

Then a small man with a long nose and beady eyes stepped up to Moya and said, “Who you think you are, grillin’ Su Señoria?”

But Moya wasn’t afraid of him.

“Don’t suppose you’re gonna stand out there in front of an unpic-ed bull, are you?”

José asked Pedro what he thought.

Pedro shook his head. He was desperate to know what was troubling José, but he didn’t know how to ask.

The blow-horn sounded again and the mousy man said, “It’s gettin’ late. Supposed to be done by now.”

José glanced at his watch again. “Let’s get started,” he said.

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The man in charge insisted upon a bit of fanfare. “Crowd’s been waitin’ a long time,” he grumbled.

There was no way around it so they got their gear out of the van. José took off the watch his uncle had given him and hid it under the passenger seat. As long as it kept ticking he knew he’d be alright.

They formed a triangle and followed the man in charge across the ring again, their capes draped over their left arms. José walked right behind the man, taller than any of them, the muscles of his buttocks and legs rippling beneath the tight pants, maintaining his dignity despite the farce.

When they got to the other side the man in charge stepped to one side and bowed with a flourish of one arm under his heavy gut. Then he straightened himself up and José could hear him wheezing as he raised his arm in a grand gesture directed towards a woman sitting on a lawn chair on the slope just beyond the wall of the ring.

She was a woman so fat that her eyes and mouth seemed to float in her face. Another fat woman, who might have been her sister, held an umbrella over her head. Although the woman in the lawn chair nodded solemnly, her chin bobbing on the rolls of flesh, the rest of her friends cackled like hens.

“The Queen of the Sticks,” muttered Moya, as he ever so slightly inclined his torso before turning away.

The blow-horn sounded and the crowd roared their approval. The man in charge raised his hands in the air and clapped them as he sauntered across the ring again.

José took up his position directly opposite the tail end of the truck. He placed himself so that the bull would come for him. That’s all he could do now, try to keep the bull coming at him. Pedro and Moya fanned out on either side of him.

José spread his cape and smoothed it by trotting backwards and dragging it along the ground. He glanced at the holding stalls where they had finally managed to get the gates down by pounding them into place with a big rock. A crowd of teenagers milled on top of the stalls, more concerned with each other than with what was about to happen. The man with the beady eyes had gone around the ring telling everybody to get their legs up, but some of the boys sat there with their feet dangling.

Pedro stood to the left of José and he looked across the ring at him. The distance between them seemed to shimmer and vibrate. Pedro didn't know if it was the heat, or if he was trembling as much as that. But he knew he was going to lose José. The certainty struck him so hard that his knees almost buckled. He didn't know how he knew, and he didn't have much time to think about it. The ramp was down and the gate on the back of the truck was up. Everyone could hear the bull thrashing about inside, a lonely beast filled with terror and rage.

Pedro wanted to call out to José but he didn't know what to say. He tried to wet his lips with his tongue but it was dry. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his wrists and he readjusted his grip on the cape. He was looking at the ramp and he was hearing the bull when he remembered the hawk reeling in flight above the tobacco field. He had always preferred a faceless conception of that which can't be named anyway and there it was, coming for him.

Originally published in *Del Sol Review*
Issue # 13, The Winter 2006 Issue

<http://delsolreview.webdelsol.com/dsr13/nv-eriksen.htm>