

## What's Buried in the Ground

Curt Eriksen

The rain is falling steady this morning. It started sometime last night. I was up before it was light, stoking a fire in the old cast iron stove. It's still dark now, at seven o'clock. But I couldn't sleep anymore anyway. Couldn't sleep all night. I just kept thinking about the water seeping into the earth, and that hole they're going to dig.

It was Vicente who told me about it. He's related to the bones they're looking for. One of the two young women the *fachas* murdered and buried near the woods was his great-grand-aunt Adela. Of course Vicente never knew her, he just heard about her all the time. His great grandfather was a red as well, and he did a spell at the end of the war in a concentration camp in the south of France. In the chaos that followed the German invasion of the free zone in 1942, Panillo escaped with a bunch of ex-republicans and walked all the way back to La Vera, crossing both the Pyrenees and the Sierra de Gredos, barefoot.

Vicente and I grew up together so I knew Vicente's grandpa, who was also called Panillo, before his skin and eyes turned yellow and he started pissing sludge. He was an ornery old man, but he only used to try to knock his wife around when he drank too much. He blamed the drinking on the sense of misery that he had inherited, along with his nickname, from his old man, the original Panillo, who had to beg for handouts in order to survive after the war from the same scum who would have happily shot him. Long before Vicente was born his great grandfather Panillo hung himself with his belt from the branch of a common fig tree.

Vicente's grandma was a small scrappy woman with some real grit in her elbow, and she gave back about as good as she got. Whenever I went around and saw the *Abuelo* sulking I knew he'd lost another one of their fights. He'd sit in a corner on a three-legged stool and whittle away with his carving knife, muttering threats and blasphemies under his breath. He never learned how to do much more than herd goats, but he could carve a fine white garlic press out of the root of an ash tree and pawn it on a tourist for a few hundred pesetas. Once, when the *Abuelo* stumbled home in time for lunch after an all-night binge, I saw Vicente's grandma spin around in the kitchen with a hot skillet in both hands and whack him across the side of the head. The pork chops stuck to the wall before they started to slide down the greasy tiles, and the *Abuelo* lasted about as long as the chops did, before his knees buckled and he crumpled on the floor.

After his liver finally quit, and they buried the *Abuelo*, they found the letters he had kept in an old sock stuffed inside the toe of a rubber boot at the back of a plywood wardrobe. The *Abuelo* never told anyone about the letters, and as far as anyone knew he had never learned to read. They were letters great grandfather Panillo, who was also illiterate, must have given him before he hung himself, letters Vicente's great-grand-aunt Adela had written to the other girl who was killed with her within months of the fascist uprising. Vicente and I read the letters together and it turns out those two girls liked each other a lot, and that's probably one of the reasons they got shot. Now there's a law that lets men and women marry anyone they want to marry, and they can even adopt some kids if they like. The church still doesn't tolerate homosexuality, but back then they had Franco and his henchmen to do their bidding.

It's still not light when I hear a rapping on the window pane in the *salón*. I know it's Vicente so I go straight to the door and open it for him.

"You ready?" he says.

"It's still dark. Want some coffee?"

Vicente walks over to the stove and rubs his hands. I adjust the wick on the kerosene lamp and prepare another pot of coffee, then I look at Vicente's back while I wait for the water to boil and rise. Vicente had a girlfriend once, but he claims they never did anything. "It was just a waste of time," he said.

"What about your mom and dad?"

Vicente turns around and looks at me. His face is pale, but his eyes and lips are bright and the wet bangs are plastered across his forehead. I've given him my umbrella, and more than once, but he's one of those guys who's always losing umbrellas.

"They're on edge," he says. "Scrapping again."

Some people call Vicente's dad Panillo, but he doesn't like the name. He used to drink too, but Vicente's mom put her foot down and he finally went to an AA meeting in the village. There aren't many of us here in Villanueva, so everyone knows everyone else's business. The AA meets in a storeroom behind the church, and Vicente's dad was used to seeing the same men and women who sat on the plastic chairs with their heads bowed and their hands in their laps in the crowded boisterous bars around the plaza. When it was his turn to speak he stood up and said, "I shouldn't have come here." Then he walked right out of the meeting. But he never touched another drop of wine. He tells Vicente all the time that there is no weakness in human nature that can't be overcome with a little will power.

The coffee gurgles and I turn away from Vicente. That’s one thing I worry about more than ever now, whether Vicente has the strength of character he needs to follow through with his end of the bargain. But I dismiss my fears again and turn the blue flame down and heat some milk in a tin cup over the burner. I don’t take any sugar in my coffee, but Vicente likes his good and sweet. I pour a little less than half of the coffee into his mug, since he gets the jitters if he drinks too much caffeine.

“So?”

We sit at the little round table in my *salón*, near the stove.

“The old man hasn’t said anything. He’s pretending it isn’t such a big deal. You know how he is. So unreal.”

I test the coffee, which is hot, but doesn’t scald my tongue.

“What about your mom?”

“Her psoriasis has flared up. She can’t stop picking at it.”

Vicente looks me straight in the eye. It’s that intensity in his expression that I always find so attractive. But there’s no time for any of that, so I stare into my mug.

“What’s she so worried about?”

“Can’t you figure it out?”

When Vicente heard that Garzón was going to investigate these crimes and was willing to authorize the disinterring of suspected mass graves, he was so excited he got in touch with COGAM. He used my cell phone to call the gay and lesbian association and I had to relay their messages back to him. No one expected anything to happen so soon, but in May the Junta de Extremadura sent a team with a ground-penetrating radar to look for alterations in the subsoil. Six months later the Association for the Recovery of

Historical Memory had arranged to have an excavator at the site as soon as it was light enough to see.

“I don't think they'll bring any banners, or anything like that,” I say.

Vicente looks out the window, through the glass that is finally graying, the dull light reminding me of the bones they're hoping to find.

“Maybe they won't even show,” he says. “Maybe the rain'll keep 'em away.”

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We take my dirt bike, a Yamaha 250, and ride out the long way to the site they've selected. The rain has let up, but the road is slick and muddy and the potholes are brimming with water. I lean to avoid the potholes and we swerve, the treadless back tire fishtailing, but I've been riding this thing for years and I know how to keep it upright.

As soon as we crest the hill we can see the orange excavator parked in a field near the edge of the woods, with the bucket folded under the articulated arm. Then the road dips towards the creek and the excavator disappears from view.

Vicente's grandpa never said anything about the two girls being in love, and perhaps he never knew, but he always talked about the long walks they liked to take out this way, below the village, something his dad must have told him.

I know this area too, and if the clouds weren't so heavy and low we'd be able to see Gredos from here, ridged with snow. I downshift and ride the brakes as we rut along the slippery slope and then veer into the grassy field. Vicente's dad's car is already parked beside the excavator, and there are two other cars there, both of which have Madrid plates.

As we near the cars, everyone standing around the excavator turns to look at us. I feel Vicente tighten his grip on my hips, and I wish it didn't have to be like this. Before we reach the cars and stop I register the look of concern in his mother's eyes. She stands holding a folded umbrella in both hands, and I remember her asking me once to stay away from her son.

"You made it," grunts Vicente's dad. The ends of his trousers are tucked into his work boots and they're already splattered with mud. It's a weekday and he should be building someone else's house, but after all, it's his great aunt they're looking for.

"That's it then," says a man wearing a jacket with the ARMH logo on it, a stylized A made with a slash of red and yellow, the colors of the Spanish flag. He indicates the stakes that have been driven into the ground to mark the area where they will dig, about twenty meters long and a couple of meters wide. "Just go slow."

Suaréz, the *maquinista*, climbs into the excavator and starts the engine. A sallow thin man with a short trim haircut wearing a brand new Mackintosh detaches himself from the others and walks up to us and says, "Hi, I'm Félix."

He offers a soft hand with slender fingers cool as icicles.

"I'm with COGAM," he says to me. "You must be Vicente?"

"No." I use my chin to indicate Vicente, aware of his mom watching us. "That's him."

Félix steps close to Vicente and places a hand on each arm, just below the shoulder.

"I'm glad you called us," he says. "This is really big. It'll prove that we were victims as well."

Vicente takes a step back and shakes off the man’s hands.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

Félix’s hands drift slowly to his sides.

“I see,” he says, and something in the way he holds his body changes.

Suaréz is maneuvering the excavator so that the first bite he takes out of the soggy field will be in line with the stakes they’ve driven, and Vicente walks around the machine to the other side of the site, across from his mom and dad, where no one else is standing.

“It’s his blood,” I say.

Félix looks at me as if he can’t remember my name, which is true, since I didn’t give it to him.

“Who?” he says.

“Everyone knows everyone here,” I explain. “That’s his mom and dad over there. The bones they’re looking for, it was his great-grand-aunt, on his dad’s side of the family. You should try a little respect.”

The excavator shudders and blows soot, as Suaréz reaches with the mechanical arm and drops the teeth of the bucket into the earth.

“He called *us*,” Félix whines. And he walks gingerly across the muddy tracks the excavator has left in the field, back to join Vicente’s mom and dad and the representative from the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory.

§

Later that evening, when Vicente and I are lying in my bed, he says, “I think that guy, Félix, said something to my mom.”

Vicente is turned on his side, with his back to me, facing the wall. Lately, whenever we make love, he inevitably moves away from me once we have finished. I keep wanting to ask him about this, to find out what's wrong. I know it's not easy for him. My folks are long gone, buried in the shade of the cypress trees that line the cemetery walls, so I have nothing to fear in being discovered. When I was nine and suddenly orphaned Vicente's mom and dad took me in. His old man and my old man did the *mili* together in Ceuta, and after that they returned to Villanueva where they built houses together until my old man drove off the bridge and into the river. I don't have any brothers or sisters, and Vicente's dad felt it was the least he could do. Vicente and I helped him put the bunk beds together, and I slept on the bottom until I was old enough to realize that there was more to my relationship with Vicente than the vital friendship. Since we needed more privacy, and I could afford to live on my own with the job in the new supermarket, I decided to move out.

That was only a year and a half ago. But during the last few months something has changed. Eager to feel close to Vicente and reassured, I press myself into the warmth of his back. But when I touch his shoulder the muscles flex, and even though I make a game of it and try to massage the shoulder, the tension won't release. We remain like that for a while, each of us holding our breath and calculating what the other might do next, before Vicente tosses the blanket aside and sits up on the edge of the bed and bends over and starts feeling for his trousers on the floor.

His abrupt movements create a draft that sucks at the yellow flame of the candle on the night stand. I lie on my back and watch the shadows cast against the ceiling, and I understand that my possession of Vicente is as ephemeral as that flickering light.

“You’re only upset,” I say. “It’s because they didn’t find anything.” And then, when Vicente doesn’t answer me, I add, “What could he possibly say to your mom that would make any difference?”

Vicente twists his torso and scowls at me as he pulls on a sock.

“You think a bunch of old bones mean that much to me? What happened, happened! Now it’s over. Who cares anymore?”

I get the feeling he’s not referring to the women who were shot over seventy years ago. But I don’t want to force him on this, and create even more pressure. It’s true that Vicente has finally admitted to himself that his mom knows, but they’ve never talked about it. And he still insists that her Catholicism makes her reluctant to fully comprehend that her only son is gay and will always remain that way, a fact she would rather deny. What neither of us can imagine, though, what we’ve never even dared to discuss, is how much his dad might know, or how he might react when he finds out.

“If you didn’t want them to be here, then why did you get in touch with COGAM in the first place?”

“How did I know they were going to send some faggot who doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut?”

“Not everyone lives cloistered in a butthole like we do,” I say, aware of my voice rising. “They come from another world, Vince. Madrid is a whole other world. In Madrid you can do as you please.”

“People like us get beat to a pulp and pitched in the gutter all the time. We’re despised wherever we go. Here, there, everywhere.”

“Not anymore, Vince. All of that has changed.”

“You think it’s changed, but you don’t know. How do you know? You’ve never lived there. You can fool yourself,” he says, “but you can’t fool me.”

Vicente is standing now and buttoning his shirt. Even though the candlelight in the bedroom is slight and uncertain, I can see that his hands are shaking.

I lift myself onto my elbows.

“What’s really bothering you? Eh? You want to renege now, is that it? And live with your mom and dad for the rest of your life? You want to go on pretending to be something that you’re not?”

I can feel the weight of the scorn Vicente heaps on me then, by simply narrowing his beautiful eyes.

“Can’t you figure anything out?” he says, before he leaves the room, without slamming the door behind him.

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By the time I get to work the next morning my cell phone is dead, and when I plug it in to recharge the battery there’s no message from Vicente. While I’m stacking the cans of tomato paste, I think about it. When Vicente’s mom asked me to stay away from him I had just moved out, and he was seeing that girl. I went over to the house one day and Vicente wasn’t there. “He’s gone to look for *niscalos*,” his mom said. “With Tanya.”

I turned to leave, knowing where I would find them, since Vicente and I always looked for the carrot-colored mushrooms in the pine woods on the south side of the creek.

“Wait,” said his mom. She was making lentil soup and she invited me into the kitchen to test it and tell her if it needed anything.

“More salt?” she asked, after I had sipped from the spoon she held out to me.

“It's perfect, Ma.”

She had always encouraged me to treat her as if I, too, were her son. But at the same time there was always something she seemed to hold back and keep away from me, in reserve for Vicente.

“This girl is nice,” she said. “She's a Caperote. One of her uncles has that plumbing business, and he works mornings in the *ayuntamiento*. He's a good man to know. Maybe you should let them spend some time together.”

“What do you mean?” I blurted, before could I check myself.

“You boys have always been so”—and she raised her eyes to the ceiling as if she might find the word up there, before looking directly at me again—“inseparable.”

She still held the spoon with one hand cupped under it to keep it from dripping on the floor.

“I guess I've got you to thank for that,” I said.

“I know,” she moaned, while she looked around the kitchen for some place to set the spoon, before finally dropping it in the sink.

“Well,” I said, anxious to leave.

“You just might give Vicente a chance with this girl, that's all.”

“Vicente can do whatever he wants,” I said. “I don't care.”

“You might just give him some space, that's all.”

“Vicente's old enough to look after himself.”

“I know that, Alberto.”

“He can make his own calls.”

“Just give him a chance to find himself. That’s all I’m asking.”

I didn’t go down to the pine woods to look for Vicente that afternoon, and I stayed away from the house for months after that. I let Vicente’s affair with Tanya run its course. I even thought about leaving the village on my own, and trying my luck solo in Madrid. But within days of that conversation with his mom, Vicente was knocking on my door and begging me to forgive her on his behalf.

“She knows,” I said to him, once we were lying together again. “That’s why she told me to stay away. So you can get cured, like your dad did that time. She thinks Tanya will cure you,” I scoffed. “All it takes is a little will power.”

Since Vicente had come crawling back to me he had to put up with my barbs.

“She’s simple-minded,” he confessed. “She can’t even imagine something like this.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. But I don’t care anymore. That’s what’s changed for me.”

And ever since then I’ve been far more determined to get out of La Vera than Vicente ever was, and willing to do whatever it might take.

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When I finish my twelve-hour shift at nine o’clock that night Félix is standing in the shelter of the doorway, smoking a cigarette. It’s raining again, and he’s still wearing his Mackintosh zipped up to his throat, with the hood pulled over his head.

I’m tired and not the least bit interested in him, so I walk right by. But he flicks the butt into the street and grabs my wrist and says, “Hey, I need to know something.”

“Take your hand off of me,” I say, and he releases his grip.

“What was your name?” he asks, as if he could have forgotten.

“I didn't say.”

He trails along beside me, in and out of the light of the only lamppost between the supermarket and the road that runs through the village. When we get to the road a car whishes by, its wheels displacing the water that has accumulated against the curb. I step away just in time, but Félix takes the brunt of the spray.

“*Joder!*”

I cross the road and he trots after me.

“They found something,” he calls.

I almost hesitate, just enough for him to notice the shift in my gait, before pushing forward again.

“A whole femur, half a pelvis and fragments of cranium. And what looks like a bit of jaw, with five teeth in it.”

I keep walking up the dark path to the *choza* I'm renting. Vicente explained to me that the acids in the soil can eventually eat through the bone, so they weren't even sure they would find anything.

“They put the pieces in plastic bags. And they asked me to take them to Madrid, for DNA testing. I'm on my way there now. They want to dig some more. And the ARMH guy has to be there as soon as it gets light tomorrow morning.”

When I get to the door I finger the keyhole and push the key in the lock and Félix says, “They don't know if the bones belong to just one person, or to both of the girls. Or to more than that.”

Then he surprises me and asks, “Can I come in? I won’t stay long. I promise. I just need a coffee, before I drive back to Madrid. And these pants...”

But I say, “No.”

And he snarls, “I don’t know why the fuck you called and asked us to come out here.”

“I didn’t ask for anything.”

“It’s almost as if you’re ashamed of who you are.”

“I’m not ashamed of anything.”

“You and that hillbilly boyfriend of yours,” he taunts. “Terrified of what people are going to think.”

“Fuck off,” I say, and I push him away.

But he’s stronger than I expected and he slams me against the door. We can’t see each other in the dark, but I can feel the spray of spit when he hisses, “This is our gig now. You wanted publicity, you’re going to get it. I told your lover what he can expect. This is big news, and it can help us. I’ll be back tomorrow night, with a cameraman.”

And then he’s gone.

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When I wake up I don’t even look at the time on my cell phone. I can see through the chinks in the *persiana* that the clouds have cleared, there’s a bright moon somewhere in the sky, so I figure sunrise is a couple of hours away yet. But as soon as I close my eyes and roll over I know I won’t sleep again. I feel like I’ve been stuck with the point of a sharp spear and urged to get up.

Not wanting to bother with the lamp, I fumble in the dark for my clothes. The fire I made as soon as Félix walked away has gone out, but the *salón* is still tempered by its warmth. I find the flashlight and check it to make sure the batteries are still good, but I switch it off since there's plenty of moon glow out there.

The shack I live in is on the edge of the village, and I keep my bike in a shed down the road. The man who owns all this land is also a Caperote, and he maintains the original family farm on the outskirts of the village. They have hens and goats and grow tobacco, and they sell the eggs and cheese and anything that's left over from the big vegetable patch they put in every spring. They've even got a sign by the main road that says that their produce is 100% organic, but I've seen my landlord out there late summer evenings, when the sunset is a faint blister in the sky, with the *mochila* full of insecticide on his back.

It used to be nothing but farmland out this way, but now the road is paved as far as the olive oil co-op. At this boundary hour of the night—no longer the day before, and not yet the next morning—there's no one around to hear my feet crunching on the cinders. Even the dogs are still. And that brings to mind the group of four or five zealous *fachas* who stomped down this way with their hunting rifles on the night they came for the two girls. Every farm had at least a couple of dogs then, but they just shot them as they went along. The front was advancing from both the south and the west, and the militants were confident that there would be more ammunition. The massacre in Badajoz was already old news, and there was plenty of talk of the summary executions in Navalmoral, only forty kilometers away. The fascists weren't afraid of anybody anymore.

Vicente's grandpa told us the young man leading the pack had proposed to his aunt right before the uprising. Under pressure from her folks she agreed to the marriage, but as soon as the war broke out and Adela saw which side her future husband was on, she had an excuse to pull out of the arrangement. Her friendship with the other girl was famous in the village, and it might have been her fiancée's resentment of the real object of Adela's affections, more than any desire to make her his wife, that led him down this hill that night.

But it was an Indian summer then, hot and dry. Now my shoes have soaked through, and my feet are cold.

When I get to the shed I shine the light on the padlock and the dogs start up. There's a chain-link fence between us and they know me, but they're glad to have something to do on a night when their sleep is so shallow. They howl and snap ferociously, overcome by an instinct they can't control. I pull on the wooden door and feel the hinge that has come loose of the jamb slip, so I grab the broken panel and lift it as I swing it to one side.

I didn't have a chance to clean the bike after we went down to the excavation site yesterday and it's flecked with mud, but I'm only going to pile more on top of this. I wheel it out of the shed and into the road, where the side mirror glints in the moonlight. When I kick the engine over and roll the throttle the dogs go even crazier, attacking the fence with their teeth and nails. I throw my leg over the saddle and push off, and leave their mad barking behind.

I take the short way around, past the co-op and down to the creek, where I'll cross it from below. After the co-op the road is unpaved again, scarred with deep tread marks

in the mud from all the tractor and truck traffic down this way. There are potholes gleaming dully with water, and pockets of heavy fog. My headlight jabs in front of me, it pierces the dark but doesn't reveal anything. I use the moonlight instead, and try to follow the road in its milky glow.

The bridge over the creek was washed away last spring and the water is high. I could have gone around the other way, but I've got a feeling there's no time. I work the clutch and manage to ford the strong current, my rear wheel slipping and spinning as it seeks traction on the bed of smooth round river stones. My pants are wet up to the thighs now, but I don't care. I keep remembering the day before they started searching for the bones, when Vicente and I agreed to run away together to Madrid with the money I had put aside. I was overjoyed at the prospect of finding real work and living in a place with electricity, far enough away from everyone we knew to never be bothered again. But when Vicente promised me he would tell his mom what she already knows, and ask her to explain it to his dad, he couldn't hide the fear in his eyes.

I get to the other side of the creek and the bike slips out from under me when I pull on the throttle in my panic to start up the hill. I fall hard on one knee and scramble to my feet again without letting go of the clutch and the engine whines as I lift and right the Yamaha and climb on top of it, but soon I am over the rise of the hill and I can smell the scent of the rich turned earth wafting across the field, the odor of the unmarked grave where the two girls laid buried with their secret until the excavator, COGAM and the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory discovered their remains. As I lean over the gas tank and accelerate across the field the headlight bobs and picks out the orange *máquina* resting beside the long black gash at the edge of the woods, where I am

almost certain now that Vicente will be waiting faithfully for me. And I wonder, as the cold wind stings the tears out of my eyes, making it even harder to see, what you can really figure out about someone's life, once it's over, from the few scraps of themselves that they always leave behind.

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