

El Duende and the Persimmon Tree

By Alessandra Rebekkah Castellanos

Shadows under the sun forever stretch across the powdery soft lands of California, wildly caressing the towns' slinky pockets like the vines on the courtyard walls at my grandmother's ranch. The shadows do not intimidate me. Crescent Cliffs is home.

It's the sinister shadows in the night that burn viciously in the crisp air — they are cast from the glister of the moon. Their devilry I fear. Everyone fears.

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Her town, my town. I was there when he materialized.

Crescent Cliffs is not the only town he has sauntered through, claiming young girls as his innocent sweethearts. He is known throughout all of the petite pueblos together with the big cities of Central and South America.

Fathers: lock up your daughters. El Duende is on the prowl.

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Mamita says I ought to be careful since I am so beautiful. Grandmothers are supposed to say that. *Her town, my town.* I was there when he materialized. I was eight.

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She used to have the most beautiful hair in the whole town.

They say that *he* goes after those with enchantingly long hair. Her ringlets were the most bewitching and charming. Thick, dark brown locks that hugged her frail body and undulated with every movement of her figure.

I remember hiding in her room.

From the moment I met my cousin, Carolina, I became enthralled by her beauty and kindness, which washed over me with just her smile. I wanted to be in her presence at all times. I chose her closet as the perfect sitting post to watch and understand her, hoping I could soak up the heavenliness she carried with her always.

I was glad my mother and I were spending the summer at my grandmother's ranch in Crescent Cliffs. I would not miss my home in the city. I would return to Los Angeles in the fall.

Each night my cousin would sit at her vanity and primp her hair. She would sing. I

enjoyed listening to her.

One night, as I was falling asleep to her velvety singing and the hypnotic brushing of her mane, I heard something in the backyard. Music. The sluggish strumming of a guitar, perhaps. She did not notice. I peered through the shutter slats of the closet door. All I could see was my Mamita's dwarf persimmon tree. She had planted it when she first moved to this home.

The moonlight was thick and luminous. A cold sweat coated my brow as I squinted into the glowing hours of darkness.

I rubbed my eyes — perhaps I was getting too tired, I thought. I would have to wait till she fell asleep before I could leave her room undetected and go to the room I shared with my mother. I relaxed.

The next morning as I walked to the stables to feed the horses with Mamita, I came across fresh footsteps in the mud that ran alongside the pond. They looked to be the prints of a small child, yet they were wilder. They danced all the way to the entrance of the stables and then vanished. My grandmother looked at me with a frown.

As we entered the barn to prepare the horse's meals, I became distracted. The broncos were extremely quiet that morning, as if entranced. On all other days, they would be agitated when I walked in, ready to be let out into the fields to run and play. As I walked alongside the statuesque Quebra'Spaldas, my favorite horse, I saw that his tail and mane had spindly, craggy braids tumbling down his body.

As I stroked his back, I carefully inspected the messy plaits that stood out against his smooth hair. Tiny gnarled tangles clinched the roots of each braid. Each snarl sprouted another two careening through Quebra'Spaldas majestic mane, making it impossible for me to ever untangle the eerie clots.

I heard Mamita whisper, *El Duende*.

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Night after night I crept into the closet to soothe my incessant need to be around my cousin. Night after night I kept hearing the sonorous notes of a guitar accompanied by the jangle of small bells. Perhaps it was only a suitor trying to serenade my cousin, I kept thinking. Yet the melody was neither syrupy nor glazed with passion. It was spooky and coated with a foul hunger. Every time I heard it, my skin would crawl.

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I asked Mamita if she ever heard the music of the night. She peered at me cautiously and answered that she prayed she would never have to.

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Every morning something new was askew. The pond had missing fish and I would find the tails chewed off and thrown into the dirt. My dog, Little Moco, ran around, parading dreadlocks from behind his ears as he played. And a peculiar amount of half-eaten persimmons and slugs began to corral around my grandmothers tree.

My grandmother became suspicious of the abnormalities around the ranch. She only confided in me what she feared.

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She told me a story. She whispered to me of a little girl from her hometown in Guatemala, with seemingly endless, perfect hair that was once attacked by a goblin of sorts. *El Duende*. Mamita remembered it clearly.

It took place in school. The young girl had been excused from class to the bathroom. She did not return. She wasn't found until hours later out in the playground under the schoolyard tree, maniacally assaulted. When she regained consciousness, she spoke of a dwarfish man with a guitar and a sombrero who tried to capture her. She said that the crooked man tried to control her with his frightening music. Panic reverberated from within her small frame. He vanished, but not before he retaliated vindictively.

Ravenous, he defaced her exquisite head of hair. He fiercely knotted it, lacing twigs into each convoluted braid, and made her once smooth mane a thorny and matted dead crown. *El Duende* left his mark on her.

The girl did not return to school until the following week.

Rumors circled about. The pueblo's *curandera* confirmed that it had been *El Duende* who had tried to take her. The girl was traumatized and damaged. She lost her appetite, complaining that her food would turn into dirt. No remedy seemed capable of untangling the girl's noxious hair. The only way to get rid of him was with scissors. They cut the girl's hair. She was desolate, and resembled an unhinged imp from a nightmare.

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My Mamita's story was etched onto my bones. I knew he was here, too.

Later that night, I chose a different sitting post. Not to watch my cousin, but to listen to the songs of the night and to watch for the shadows under the tree.

It was there, sitting in the damp bathroom, that I saw him materialize. *El Duende*. I had heard his guitar first and then his bells jingling in the wind. It was then that I saw a small figure standing under the dwarf persimmon tree, my grandmother's tree.

The figure looked to be about three and a half feet tall. He wore all black except for a silver belt cinched tightly around his emaciated frame, and a *sombrero de charro*. His black, shoulder-length hair danced in the cool breeze.

He stood beneath the tree leaning with his right leg crossed and his toes pointed toward the soil. As I watched him, the air became hot and humid. His boots were heavy. I could feel my toes melting into the ground. For a long time, he merely stared into the bedroom window, where my cousin sat brushing her hair. I tried to scream. My voice leaked silence.

He then began to play his putrid music. I felt myself withering away. I scratched the wall with a weak attempt to hold onto the windowsill. He had seemingly endless, gnarled claw-like fingers. His long, sharp ears twitched. My stomach lurched. It was a serenade. A frightening attempt to win my cousin's heart.

He turned his head slowly in my direction.

His eyes were spine-chilling. What was supposed to be the white of his eyes were coal-black and his pupils were monstrously milky. His gaze locked onto mine. Leering. He had little glistening fangs hidden behind cracked lips, hollow cheeks, and cadaverous elf-like ears. He winked at me before he turned back, lascivious, and continued to stare at my cousin.

I could not breathe. The bathroom felt like it was caving in on me. I wanted to run to my mother.

Suddenly Little Moco came padding in with a high-pitched yap, which sent me sprinting straight for my mother's soft, soothing arms, hidden under the warm woolen blankets.

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The following morning, I awoke to the harrowing shrieks of my delicate cousin. I rushed into her bedroom alongside my mother and grandmother. The three of us stood petrified.

Her hair had been ravenously desecrated. Clumps of hair were spread about her bedding and the floor around her, leaving creamy bare spots of flesh festooned with bloody lacerations along her scalp. The once smooth and healthy ends now splintered and exuded venom. The sparse hair he had left her, he had spun into hundreds of wicked braids, each caked with soil and the juicy meat of persimmons. El Duende had again left his mark.

Tears cascaded down the pillows of my grandmother's cheeks. My mother's mouth hung open, contorted from the searing pain of seeing her niece harmed. I longed to howl with rage. I had seen him and I had done nothing but run and hide.

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Stifling her sobs, my grandmother fled quickly to the kitchen. From down the hall, we heard her pulling down bottles from the cupboard. She called for me to come and help her. She explained that we had to take action and prepare my cousin for tonight. That there were a few obscure remedies that we could try in hopes of finding a way to get El

Duende to leave her unmolested.

We spent the morning cleaning her wounds and cutting her once beautiful head of hair. My cousin spent the day draining her eyes of tears. By nightfall she looked like an abused young boy. It was the first time I had gone a whole day without seeing her smile. We took turns comforting her.

As bedtime drew near, we secured the whole house. We made sure no lock went unchecked. We left Little Moco out in the yard with the hopes that he would sound the alarm if we were no longer alone.

We then poured every ounce of olive oil upon my cousin's head, massaging it into every pore and strand of short hair. We then continued to coat her skin in the oil as well. Mamita said that it would repulse him and that he would leave her be.

We stayed the night in her room. My mother and grandmother took shifts keeping watch and praying to La Virgencita to watch over my cousin. I don't recall sleeping a wink.

At midnight, it began.

We heard the serrated tempo of the guitar and the clinking of the bells. We expected to hear Little Moco's growls and unwavering barking, but we heard not a yelp.

All of a sudden, a paralyzing silence swept through the room. We heard vicious cackling out by the persimmon tree.

Mamita continued to pray. She took out a bag filled with all the hair we had cut from my cousin. Mamita proceeded to burn the strands over the flickering flame of a candle. The smell was nauseating. I gained control of my senses and did my best not to recoil and slink away.

El Duende reacted with grisly agony. He bellowed in horror at the sight and smell of us burning the once-precious hair. The hair he had marked. His hair. His shrieks pelted the house with waves of seething pain. I too felt the singe of suffering, as I witnessed her once-stunning beauty evaporate, hideous, into vapors.

And then, silence. Our ears bled with relief when we felt him vanish from our presence. The night stretched on. We were no longer afraid.

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As the sunlight rose and flooded the room, we woke my cousin. She collapsed with a pained smile. She was free.

My mother and grandmother slogged toward the kitchen to make us *desayuno*. I stayed with my cousin.

She drifted into the bathroom and I followed her in, protective. She insisted that she was fine and needed to be alone. I obeyed and crouched down to the floor outside the bathroom door.

My heart caved in as I heard her beginning to whimper. The ripple of her sobs reached me and I too began to thaw out the tears I had held onto so tightly throughout the night.

Suddenly she stopped. I knew something was wrong. She whispered my name. I walked in. I was alone.

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I was the last one to ever see my cousin. Eight years have gone by and she still has yet to return to us.

My mother and I joined Mamita, the three of us together in the ranch on Crescent Cliffs. We are tormented by her absence. We stay because we hope she will return to us.

I know she will not. I am now sixteen; the very age my cousin Carolina was when she was taken.

Strange, that childish summer of wanting to be just like her. As the years have passed, I have become her mirror image. I keep my hair enchantingly long. Mamita begs me to cut it. I do not. And now I am only waiting for my revenge.