

**the plant**



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“...it was the wicked and wild wind blew down the doors to let me in...people couldn’t believe what I’ve become. Revolutionaries wait for my head on a silver plate; just a puppet on a lonely string... aw, who would ever want to be king.”

~from *Viva La Vida*

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**E**vil exists and always will. We all make a decision to either glory in the good of this earth or to wallow in tandem with the tormented. How is it possible to birth Gandhi or Mother Teresa and also a Hitler? Does the human condition allow for such genetically diverse mutations or is it truly a choice? Does God permit this to occur or does He make it happen to serve some other-worldly good?

Many argue that a loving God would not permit evil to invade that which is good. And it is a struggle to understand that our one life on this earth can be snatched away by chance, or evil, or the wishes of another. But, wars have filled many a history book and will continue to exist to appease those who would take that which is not theirs.

Do we really have a manifest destiny or is life as seemingly capricious as the mass murderers who count deaths with the pulling of a trigger? We have but one life for walking this earth and one destiny to fulfill. It begins at our birth and is extinguished when we take our last breath. Between these two markers lies the history that we make. But, are we the master of our own fate, the writer of our own biography, or a puppet with strings the master pulls to a tune of His making?

Perhaps, it was meant to be from the dawning of time...and the path on our life map is written in the words of an ancient book whose history cannot be altered. Can we fool history and record it to suit our own objectives and desires; or are we merely meant to ponder this great mystery until one innocuous day history walks its preordained path and all that seemed destined to be isn't and all that wasn't meant to be is. And then life, as it so often does, invites evil in:

the plant.

**W**elcome to New America! The chant still resonated in his ears; and being the new immigrant that he was, he just couldn't seem to shake it. All of this was just so foreign to him. Armando had heard tales from four generations prior going back to his great-great-grandmother about the old country and how emigrating there was the dream of all of his people, but this "new" country...what exactly did all of this mean?

And the tattoo...he was uncertain about that too. He had read in high school history about a similar tattoo that had been placed on people in Europe. But, that was such a long time ago. He couldn't remember the circumstances, so his mind turned away from the distant memory. His heart, however, felt an uncanny foreboding. Already, he had gone through so much even though his mother had prepared him well for this adventure. He must continue or feel the shame of returning to his birth country. And Armando knew that was a dead end to all his dreams.

So, as his heart pressed tightly the organs surrounding it, as if it was bracing itself for an onslaught, he walked to the first position in line. As he approached, he noticed the branding tool and cringed inwardly. It reminded him of his grandfather's ranch when they would place the hot iron on the new calves. They would loudly voice their objections with pain-laden screeches and he always wondered if it hurt them more than his grandfather had let on.

The person next to him in line cursed, bringing him fully to attention, and on his right a woman fainted. His mind swirled and somehow his feet failed to hold him up...he wasn't a coward...of this he was sure. After all, he had just sacrificed everything to follow this destiny. Yet, something near his heart told him to run and run now. Unfortunately, as the floor found his body, his

mind, too, surrendered. The paramedics rushed to his side as unconsciousness overcame him.

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Armando came to with a crowd of people surrounding him. He remembered that he was in the Hall of Citizens of New America. It was time to profess his loyalty but his mind was muddled, so he mumbled something about a pain in his head. They rushed him by ambulance to Hospital Central; at least this would buy him the necessary time to contemplate what paths lay before him.

None of his predecessors had had to go through what was now expected of him...they had merely taken a test and an oath of honor to their new homeland. How had all of this changed so dramatically and in so short a period of time? No one had warned him of this! Not one relative told a tale about the mark of citizenship. Did they have the mark placed on them and never divulged its presence? Surely, this was not the case?

Armando felt panic begin to settle into his bones, so he quietly began to recite the rosary. He felt great comfort in this age-old ritual. He would never have considered himself a good Catholic. In fact, his mother had to drag him most Sundays to Mass when what he really wanted was to continue playing soccer with the other boys his age. Now, he sent out a quick thank you to his mother for her weekly persistence. What else did he have in this foreign land to sink his comfort in now?

He was wandering lost in territory so foreign to him that he could find no land that resembled home. What had he gotten himself into? He longed to be back in the land of his ancestors and the arms of his mother. He longed to kiss the lips of his precious Vicenta, put his arms around his brother and sister, and clap the back of his father. He was almost twenty years old, but he was as vulnerable as a baby and at that moment the sadness of his heart

threatened to spill out of his eyes in a torrential down-pour. He could not recall the last time he had actually cried, but as he bit his lip to stop the tears, the pain he felt as it split was unbelievably comforting. At least he was alive and he could think and he could plan his next move.

**F**or as long as he could remember, Manny had been preparing for this day; his training had been extensive and intense. He knew the importance of his complete infiltration and so Manny prepared each day with the concentration of one whose mission weighed heavily on his young shoulders. He was small in stature, but this and his baby face belied his vast training and knowledge. In fact, he had been chosen partly because he looked so young and innocent. This definitely was a bonus in the “deception” department.

Manny’s appearance looked so cherubic and youthful that the assumptions made about him on first glance were exactly what his employers wanted. Espionage is a convoluted world of lies, deception, the stealing of information, and sometimes the murdering of an operant. Manny knew the risks in his chosen profession and so he never got involved on any personal level. He could never have told a wife anything about his daily activities, so he knew to avoid this in his youth. And when he graduated from the SOS, he was unattached and prepared to embark on his life’s work.

He had seen so much in his young life to know that his mission was, perhaps, the salvation of a country which had sunk to the depths of corruption. Its people were beyond caring at this point; they merely went about their days in robot-like fashion with seemingly little care or concern about the future.

This change in attitude had come about slowly and had begun with the championing of socialist values—free health care, “a chicken in every pot”, a no class but all-poor society—and had culminated in the Marxist values of its leader. Manny could hardly remember a time when he hadn’t been a ward of the state of New America, but his grandparents told him stories that widened his eyes and made him long for those “good old times”. They talked about

the time they owned a small market and sold to the neighborhood and money was plentiful. Their stories also spoke of people with a spirit of verbal exchange, when free thought was expected and used as a source of problem solving. But, now this was just a story that found roots in the mind of a hopeful government operative bent on a return to a better time.

Manny's family had emigrated from Panama two generations prior. They had come for the promise that was not openly spoken about in their own homeland, where freedom was a word buried generations before in a dictatorship. But, it has always been about hope and it always will be. Hope is the word we all are born with tattooed on our hearts, because man was meant to be free. It is this spirit that sends us from our roots to foreign cities...seeking that which our heart has been promised at our conception.

So, as Manny grew into a man, this seed of hope grew. And it grew into a promise to him and to future generations that he would keep until he died. Man was meant to live free on this plentiful earth and no hierarchy—socialist, Marxist, Communist or otherwise—would take this promise from him. It was in this spirit that Manny grew into the freedom-fighter he had now become. His education, thoughts, every waking hour reminded him to fight for the land his family had called home for two generations. They had already left one country; surely they wouldn't have to leave another. After all, how many times can you run from hate and evil and all of the devilish ways of government entities run by power-mongering men and decadent ideologies? It was time to draw that Maginot line in the sand and he had.

On his twenty-first birthday and upon his graduation from the SOS, Manny had promised, not just himself but his father and grandfather that he would do everything in his power to help restore all that had been lost when New America was formed. Most personal freedoms were now gone, but it had occurred so slowly that the average citizen hadn't realized it. No one knew when the Direktor took office that his agenda was to return to the history

books and redo a time that was undermined by the past efforts of the greatest nation on this earth. But now, the great United States of America was no more; the watchdog of the world was now a part of the same decadent world it had attempted to rescue. Who was watching the fall of democracy now?

**C**ameron continued his objection to the officers, but to no avail. They kept saying it was this or trial for treason—his choice. New America had its New Constitution and the law stated clearly how all citizens must comply. He remembered the deadline and how his roommates had planned their days around it. He remembered how they had asked him to join them in their escape over the wall. He had declined, after all what they had heard were only rumors. Sure, some people had never returned to their apartments, but they were never certain if they just hadn't moved as the policemen had told them.

Even the tattooing was just a rumor...he had never actually seen one. But now, here he was and everything he had believed as a child wasn't anymore, and everything he knew was evil had come home to live in New America. There had been warnings, but his prideful people had been convinced they were invincible. Even beginning with the twin tower's destruction and then the constant civil-warring between the classes hadn't convinced him otherwise. This was America, land of the free?

Somehow, his heart had always told him to believe, but what could he believe in now? His heart flew to another time when the Jews were marked by the beastly Hitler and high school history class had never felt as terrifyingly real as now. Cameron remembered how his history teacher had down-played the mass murders and even tried to convince his classmates that it was just a war, like World War I or the Korean Conflict. Somehow, he hadn't believed his teacher's words. And now these lessons were coming to his present to remind him why we record history. It is not to rewrite that gory novel, from which come so many gory movies, but to remind people to never repeat the mistakes of the past.

How had he become a part of this history? Why had he not seen it coming? Where was the God of his youth to love and protect him from this? He was young and had just begun to live his life—was it over so soon? His mind sent thoughts furiously rebounding like so many BB's in a jar.

Maybe, it was all true...maybe, it was happening again...maybe history had passed through time, eaten up the facts, and regurgitated the innocent with just the perpetrators identities changed? How on this earth had the mighty fallen so far and so quickly? Where were the other protestors and why was it not alright to just say “no”?

There was no time. Cameron heard that the traitors had only a “mock” trial of sorts and this was quickly followed by death. Quietly, this New America disposed of any and all who would voice any objection to the mark...and they were never heard of again. Why hadn't he accompanied his friends in their escape? There were still lands where freedom was valued and honored or so they had heard. His friends were probably on their way to these destinations and Cam felt a flash of helplessness wash his countenance.

He heard them demand one more time, but it was his reply that surprised not just the officers, but him as well...“no”. It was quiet, but purposeful. He could not, he would not...life was just too precious to be owned by anyone. Cameron felt the pain of the tazer interrupt his nervous system and was rendered helpless as he hit the ground. The last thing he remembered was the blind-fold, manacled hands, and being forced into the back of a police car...he wondered if his family would just think he had moved or followed his friends in their escape over the wall to freedom.

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