

“Isabella...I shall sow again”

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“Mamma, someday I will climb that mountain”

Having said this, little Nathan, all of 8 years of age, turned his head and looked at his mother Isabella with an impish smile spreading on his face.

They were standing in their vast orchards in Santa Clara, a farming town in central Spain. She was supervising the closure of farm work for the day. Isabella did not immediately pay attention to Nathan’s statement. Then, albeit slowly, the significance of what he just said dawned on her. She turned and looked at him. Nathan’s gaze was back at the mountain. Isabella noticed that he was not looking at the mountain, but was rather focusing on it. He had narrowed his eyes and was holding his gaze steadily. She could feel his mind working and setting the summit as his goal. Then, following his gaze, she herself looked at the mountain, the mighty Sierra Morena.

It was easy for Isabella to recognize the steel in Nathan’s gaze because it came from his father, Juan de Carlos. That thought made Isabella Juan de Carlos proud, in fact, very proud.

She stepped towards Nathan, the limp on her left leg pronounced, but not exaggerated. She ran her fingers affectionately through Nathan’s curly and unruly hair. Nathan shifted a little closer so that it would be easier for his Mamma to reach and touch his hair. He did it in such a way that Isabella would not feel that he was showing sympathy to her limp, but a courtesy due from a son to his mother. Isabella recognized that as well because, again, that came from his father. The pride and happiness took her mind back a good 8 years.

It was 8 summers ago that Juan de Carlos had crossed the Sierra Morena and arrived in the farming town of Santa Clara with nothing but the last of his savings, an old dilapidated truck and a prayer on his lips. He bought the cheapest piece of land available. He decided to cultivate wheat like the rest of the town and purchased a rundown store in the central market, which he planned to use as his trading point.

Exactly opposite to his store was the store of Don Alejandro de Peron, the wealthiest landlord in town. When the De Perons had arrived in Santa Clara, the land was a hard sun baked brown. But Alejandro believed in the land and it’s hidden promise of prosperity. He earned the title of Don through sweat drenched toil which made the hard soil of Santa Clara yield to his perseverance. When his daughter was born he named her Isabella which meant “God’s promise”. For him she symbolized the promise of prosperity kept true by the land.

Isabella grew a happy and bubbly child full of girlish naughtiness. But, as the De Peron’s prospered, tragedy befell them. Isabella’s left leg was badly crushed in a farming accident, impairing it’s use. What compounded the agony for her and her family was that the accident

was caused due to an unintentional error by Don Alejandro himself. Neither the family nor the Don could bring to forgive themselves.

After a long period in bed, Isabella started moving around supported by two wooden crutches. She tried her best to be normal and to ignore her disadvantage. But, whenever her father and her family saw her in that manner, with her wooden sticks of support, they felt the enormous weight of guilt and it showed. She in turn felt guilty for making those who loved her feel guilty. She wanted to forget her weakness and ignore it. But the overt kindness and sympathy of her family reinforced in her mind that she was weak. She lived every single day being reminded about her disadvantage though it was the intention of none to do so.

Slowly the guilt and the agony took a toll. It buried the magnificent physical beauty that God had endowed her with. Soon, the only glances that she received from men and women were those of sympathy. She simply hated it and tried her best to be invisible to the rest of the world. Her only outings soon became visits to her father's store in the central market, to help with a sundry task or two.

Isabella's chance encounter with Juan was just two days after he had set shop in the market. Their attentions were caught by the shrill and painful howl of a dog on the street run over by a car. Isabella hobbled to the spot, as fast as possible on her crutches to help the dog and Juan was there on the spot before her. The dog was a mangled heap of blood, bones and flesh. The curious crowd that had reached the spot was offering nothing but sympathetic comments. Isabella dropped both her crutches and almost fell beside the dog. She noticed that he was breathing heavily and each breath seemed to be his last.

She looked up at the crowd, her eyes moist and beseeching help. Her eyes caught Juan's. He withdrew from the crowd and quickly returned with an old blanket. They gently, ignoring the blood and gore that was spilling on their selves, lifted the dog using the blanket and carried it to Juan's truck. Juan started to the veterinary clinic in town but their effort was in vain. The dog died on the way.

Juan stopped the truck by the side of the road, looked at Isabella and mumbled a genuine sorry. They said nothing for quite some time. After a while, Juan turned the truck around and headed towards his farm. To Isabella's questioning glance he answered, "We must give him a decent burial".

Arriving, Isabella noticed the dry barren piece of land that was being tilled by a small bunch of labourers, preparing it for the first sowing. They carried the dog to a corner of the field where Juan dug a grave and gently wrapped the dog in the old blanket. Together they lowered the dog in the grave and gently put the soil back on top.

As Juan stepped back he noticed tears in Isabella's eyes. She whispered through her tears, "...that was an act of kindness. Muchas Gracias".

Juan nodded and stood next to her, facing the grave. They stood silently, under the bloody hot sun with the dry barren land their witness. At that moment, they were together for the very first time, united by their act of kindness.

Afterwards whenever they saw each other at the market place, she had a smile for him. Juan tried to smile back, but he was the kind of man who smiled inside but could not somehow

show it on his face. But, in a funny kind of way Isabella understood and she was fine with that.

A few days later a sign went up on Juan's store front – "Wanted: Supervisor for Juan De Carlos's Farm". Isabella read it, thought hard for exactly 10 seconds and then she was in his store offering her candidature for the position. Juan thought for a moment, purposely did not look at her limp left leg, and gently commented.

"It's not a desk job"

In response, Isabella looked hard at her limp left leg and her crutches implying clearly that she understood what he meant and offered the counter point.

"I did not expect it to be"

Juan noticed that her jaws were set and her eyes focused on his, unblinking. He liked it. He returned the gaze calmly and then he noticed that her lips were slowly curling at the edges into a naughty challenging smile as if daring him to offer her the job. He found it delightful though he did not show it. His response was simple.

"You can start right now"

Isabella thanked him and asked...."what should I take care of?"

Juan thought for a moment and his face became rapt.

"My land has to be prepared for it's first sowing"...pausing a while he added..."my life depends on it. Make sure you do a good job."

Isabella understood.

The next two months passed in a flurry, preparing the land for the first sowing of wheat. They spent maximum time at the farm, she organizing the labor, supervising the work, inventorying the supplies, paying the wages and keeping a tab over everything.

Juan drove her hard and he did so purposely. He saw a will and intent in this sweet girl that was lying dormant. He realized that she did not need kindness, but challenges. He understood that she wanted to help, not be helped. Isabella was thrilled. She was being treated an equal and soon she found herself flying around the farm and her crutches were struggling to keep up with her rather than supporting her. By the end of the second month, with all the effort, her leg muscles started developing. Soon, she needed only one crutch to support her. Her weaknesses were eroding.

During this period she also learned more about Juan. He was wealthy once, immensely. She also learned that he had loved once, very deeply and had married the one he loved. Bad times befell him and he lost a significant portion of his wealth. That did not break him. But, something else broke him, well, almost. His wife took whatever remaining wealth he had, leaving him abandoned and alone. But then, like any true man of grit, he had lived to fight another day. The more time that she spent with him, she realized that he was a fighter, a true one and a good one.

Soon, the tilling and the fertilizing of the land were complete and the time for sowing approached. It was a time for farmers to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. For Juan, he could not afford the worst. The last of his money was on this farm. If his crop failed there was only darkness in front.

The day before sowing, Isabella found Juan standing at the edge of his freshly tilled land, lost in thought, gazing at his fields of hope. She went to him and stood close.

“Are you worried?”

Juan was a bit startled. He had not seen her come. He looked at her and did not reply. He turned his eyes again towards the fields.

Isabella then said something that came out of her before she even realized...

“Juan, may whatever you sow tomorrow be bountiful”

Juan was struck by the deep meaning of her words. He looked deep into Isabella’s eyes searching for a deeper meaning. Though he did not want to, at that moment, the fear of another defeat that he had been carrying for so long came blurring out.

“I have sown before and I have reaped” ...Juan hesitated, then continued “...and then I lost it all”

Isabella replied calmly;

“...that makes you wise in the ways of the world”

Juan could not stop, this girl had some power over him, “I had money once and I lost it”

Isabella replied with a smile, her calm intact;

“...that makes you experienced in handling fortune and calamity equally”

Juan hesitated, and then he whispered, emptying the final bucket of pain in his heart, “I have loved once...(he swallowed) with all my heart..... and I lost....”

Isabella was silent for a moment but she was still smiling when she replied;

“Juan..... that makes you human”

Her words fell like rain on parched earth. Looking deep into her eyes he saw another human being ready to see him as one. He saw someone who appreciated his strengths and accepted his weaknesses. He saw a fellow human who could turn his bad days to good by telling a simple, “...it’s alright”. He saw a woman who did not care about his past but only about a future that could be spent together.

Isabella looked into his eyes deeply and moved closer to him, supported by the wooden crutch. She leaned on his shoulders and he held her close caressing her hair. Then, Isabella decided that his shoulders were a better support than the wooden crutch. She let it go and it fell beside her never to be used again. Isabella walked after that, with a limp of course, but she walked, on her own. There was a good man for support.

As they stood together that day, looking at their field of hope, silent and wishing, the sun was into its final descent behind the Sierra Morena. The evening sky was a brilliant splash of gold, purple and blue. At that moment, there was hope in the world and there was love and hope in the hearts of Juan and Isabella.

The next few months were months of joy. They spent their time tending the growing saplings and exchanging the stories of their lives. Juan did not hold back and bared his soul before her and she accepted everything. She was all of 21 and he was 37. He knew what was coming and the repercussions that he would have to face. He was ready.

Soon it was time to harvest and the Saturday before the harvest Isabella was at the market buying fresh tomatoes. A merchant she knew asked casually – “I hear Don Juan has a bumper crop this year?”

The words “Don Juan” was sweet on Isabella’s ears. She recognized that Juan was slowly but surely earning the title of “Don”, reserved for men who matter. The town was treating him with respect. She felt proud. Then she repeated the words “Don Juan” to herself. In Spanish when one says Juan, at the “n”, the tip of the tongue lightly touches the upper palate of the mouth and it did so for Isabella. The light touch of the tip of the tongue tickled her. She repeated the words “Don Juan” again and again. It felt delicious rolling out of her tongue smoothly. Then she realized that she was feeling strangely possessive about the words. The thought was warm, fuzzy and special. She smiled to herself, her face glowing. She knew it was time.

The next day, evening came at the farm and she was with Juan when they finished stacking the harvested wheat. She confronted him and told him very simply,

“I am staying with you, now and forever”.

Juan had seen it coming. He smiled and replied.

“There is a time for good things. Inform your father that I wish to pay him a visit tomorrow.”

Isabella looked at Juan. She wanted to rush to him and hug him. She resisted the temptation. That night, with no less than a strong tremble of fear in her voice, she informed her father.

Don Alejandro had heard the rumors and he was worried. He was not worried about the past or the wealth of the man. The past did not matter and wealth could be made. But, he worried about the intent of the man. Was the man’s love for his daughter’s wealth or was it truly for his daughter? Also, there was a question regarding his daughter’s ability to bear a child, with her handicap and her ability to fulfill her duties as a mother. He had to find out and he decided that he would do it in his own way.

The next day noon Juan arrived at the palatial mansion of the De Perons. Don Alejandro was in the courtyard, machete in hand, chopping pieces of harvested corn stalks. Not a pleasant setting when two men meet for the first time. There was tension in the air.

Juan did not bow. He merely inclined his head as if in acknowledgment. The Don responded in kind. His wife Matilda de Peron came rushing out of the kitchen, smiled quickly at Juan, as

if apologizing for the Don's bad manners and whispered a plea in Alejandro's ears, "...please, ask him inside".

Juan was ushered in and seated at the kitchen table. The Don drew a chair across him. There was a bottle of wine on the table which the Don did not open nor offer Juan. Both men eyed each other warily. Juan knew the unspoken questions the Don had in his mind.

When men speak like men to other men, it is listened to and respected by real men. Juan knew that was the way to go with the Don. He decided to make the first parry. He first looked at Matilda, inclined his head respectfully and then he addressed the Don.

"I seek the hand of your daughter Isabella in marriage. May it please the Don to do it the good way of the Christians on a Sunday of his choosing"

Matilda was impressed, and the Don could not admit that he was not, though he did not show it.

Juan detected the advantage and then pressed it on.

"...and, may it also please the Don to host the feast for the good people of Santa Clara in honor of his daughter"

The Don chewed for sometime on what Juan had said and then he asked a simple question.

"What attracted you to my daughter?"

Juan's reply was immediate

"Her kindness....I have felt it"

Something flickered in the Don's eyes. He slowly and deliberately uncorked the wine bottle and poured Juan a glass and one for himself. They each took a sip and the Don spoke again.

"Come with me"

The Don led Juan outside the house. A short walk took them to a hillock from where they could see Don Alejandro's vast fields and orchards. The Don posed a question to Juan.

"How far can you see the fields?"

"To the Sierra Morena....to the horizon"

The Don replied proudly, "All that belongs to me". Then he continued, "Now, look beneath my feet"

Juan did.

"What do you see?"

"The soil that you stand on"

The Don thought for a moment, then looked straight into Juan's eyes and told him.

“When I came to this village, even the soil under my feet did not belong to me. I sweated for everything that you see around here. I found my good wife here and she bore me Isabella. She was born on this soil. She played and grew here. She knows this soil and she knows what makes this soil yield. It is kindness.”

There was a deep pause. Juan felt the expressions on the Don’s face soften. The Don continued.

“...she has the same kindness in her heart.....and, I am glad that you have recognized it....and that you have felt it”

The Don paused and Juan smiled in acknowledgment allowing Don Alejandro to continue...

“...I hear you had a good harvest...and I like to believe that it is because you treated your land with kindness, in spite of your tough past, of which I have heard. I know nothing about it and I don’t want to”

Juan nodded respectfully. Then the Don addressed Juan, directly and formally.

“Don Juan, I accept the honor of giving my daughter’s hand in wedding to you the third Sunday of this month. It also pleases me to host a feast for the good people of Santa Clara in her honor”

They stood silent for a while, looking at each other. Then they extended hands and shook firmly.

They slowly walked back to the house and came to the courtyard where Juan’s truck stood. As Juan was about to board, he noticed a thick bush of bright blood red roses in the corner of the courtyard. They grew wild and carefree, like the spirit of a passionate woman. He climbed down and walked to where the bushes stood. He gently caressed the blossoms swaying lightly in the wind. The Don and his wife were watching.

Matilda de Peron smiled. The smile appeared on her face because she felt that a man who had the time to caress roses will be alright, really alright, for her daughter. The Don was amused and he told him about how the bushes came to be.

“I planted them the day Matilda conceived Isabella. They bloomed the day Isabella was born”

Juan smiled at the story. Then the Don made an offer.

“...When my daughter.....ahem....sorry, your wife conceives you can come. I will cut a stem for you. May it bloom the day your little one is born”

Juan came back exactly a month after the wedding and asked for a stem to be cut.

As he drove back, stem in hand, Matilda de Peron whispered in the Don’s ears, “A feisty kind, isn’t he?”

The Don was amused, “...yes, he knows a man’s priorities”. Matilda poked him in his ribs gently and the Don smiled.

Juan was smiling as he shifted gears in the truck. Smile on his face, stem placed in the seat to his right, he thought about the past glorious month. The wedding was a fantastic affair, the wine flew and Santa Clara celebrated. After the ceremony, they had repaired to their bedroom. But Isabella wanted their first night to be in the barn amongst the freshly harvested hay stacks.

In the barn he gently laid her on the rich golden hay. They looked at each other. Her face was glowing in the reflected hue from the golden hay stacks lighted by the single paraffin lamp hanging in a corner of the barn. He gently untied her hair allowing it to fall around her. The hue intensified, reflecting from the soft golden brown of her hair.

Then, when he looked deeper into her eyes, he could see the fear...the fear of her disadvantage, her doubts regarding her ability to fulfill her duties as a woman, as a wife, as a mother. He understood and to reassure her, he gently caressed her forehead, kissing it softly. Her eyes became moist. He kissed her eyes softly, swabbing the salty tears away with his soft lips.

Then, she whispered earnestly to him, making him a promise.

“Juan....let it be known that whatever you sow in me tonight....I shall receive and I shall nurture.... with every bit of my being...”

Her face was a collage of emotions. She tried to look away, but could not. Her eyes held Juan's. He smiled reassuringly and told her...

“You don't have to tell me because I know..... I trust you with my life....”

Then he proceeded to fulfill her wish. He sowed that night.

A month later, Isabella coyly and proudly told him as he came back from the farms....

“The storks will be delivering our little bundle of joy in 8 months”. Then, there was an explosion of joy and hope in their lives.

Indeed whatever was sown by Juan was received and nurtured well. The bounty bore fruit as little Nathan. The roses bloomed in the garden on his arrival. 8 years passed quickly and the rose bush became thicker and bore the loveliest of blooms. Little Nathan grew equally fast, a smart, naughty and adorable child.

Slowly Isabella came back to present, back to her orchards, back to where she was standing with little Nathan. She realized with pride that she was watching over fields and orchards that had grown manifold over the past years. Her father Don Alejandro had retired and Juan now took care of his property as well. People addressed Juan now simply as the “Don” and it was a title he earned with nothing but respect deserving hard work.

The sun had almost set and it was time to go home. Nathan pleaded for some more time to chase the rabbits in the fields.

“Shoo...off to home and get yourself cleaned up”, she gently chided him and spanked him lightly on his bums. He giggled and ran ahead of her. At that moment a naughty thought, a thought which had no business being there, came to Isabella's mind.

“...another pair of little bums to spank....well...that would be nice...”

She smiled and her thoughts continued. It felt nice, soft and warm...

“...maybe the bums of a little girl... a little girl in pig tails, giggling and bouncing across these very fields and orchards....”

Her smile turned into a blush and then she made her plans to bring the thoughts to fruition.

That night, Isabella slept a warm sleep in Juan’s arms. Then she woke earlier than usual as planned. Sensing her awake, Juan too came awake. That was according to her plan as well. Isabella gently pulled Juan out of the bed...

“Come, let’s watch the sun rise”

They walked to the windows. She wrapped a quilt around their selves to keep the early morning cold away. She stuck close to him and their warmth seeped into each other, under the quilt. Looking out of the windows they saw the Sierra Morena and the first blushes of the dawn sun. Then, Isabella looked at the garden, right below their windows. The roses, the very bushes they had planted for their first born now grew wildly. They were swaying gently in the early morning breeze. Isabella smiled and casually mentioned to Juan;

“...look at them roses”

Juan looked, smiled knowingly and held her close. She could feel more of his warmth seeping into her inside the quilt. Wrapping her hands around his torso, she nuzzled her face into his neck. Then, she inhaled him deeply. He smelt of toil to her. Then he smelt of tenacity and determination. Then he smelt of kindness and victory.

She inhaled him more and filled her soul with his sweet fragrance which no perfumer could bottle, ever. She held him tighter, almost hurting him. She nuzzled her face even deeper into the warm depths of his neck. She was overwhelmed, breathing him and feeling him so deeply. She felt she could suffocate and die right there and it would be the happiest of deaths. She loved him that much. Then she whispered, her voice choking with emotion...

“I think the roses wouldn’t mind being cut once more...”

Juan smiled, he had anticipated it. He cupped her face in his big hands, made rough by years of toil and looked at her. Her cheeks were flushed with warm blood. She blinked her eyes and moisture spread over it. Juan kissed her eyes, gently swabbing the salty tears with his soft lips.

Then, before he replied, he gently placed the tip of the fingers of his right hand on her throat because he wanted to hear as well as feel her response to what he was about to say. He held her close, brought his lips to her ears and whispered gently.

“Isabella, ...I shall sow again”

Isabella trembled, so did the roses in the garden, both in anticipation. The roses started swaying again in the gentle breeze that broke from fresh from the direction of the Sierra Morena. Isabella replied, her vocal chords carrying the tremble that Juan felt as shivers through the tip of his fingers that touched lightly on her throat, as much as he heard it.

“Juan.... let it be known that whatever you may sow in me this dawn...I shall receive and I shall nurture, with every bit of my being”

As Juan slowly led Isabella back to the bed, wrapped in the quilt, there was nothing between them. They were united in body, mind and soul. Juan gently laid her on the bed. They proceeded to explore the physical dimensions of their love and the joy of sowing.

At that moment if one were to look out through the windows of their room, the eyes could see the first rays of the sun peeping from behind the mighty Sierra Morena. But beyond the mighty mountain, beyond the sun, beyond where the eyes could reach, but where love, hope and aspirations could, the storks were getting ready with Isabella's next little bundle of joy.