

Jose Castillo spoke of curses often to his son Rick.

Rain drummed on the roof of his old Lincoln in rhythm with his heart. It was too humid, too hot, too intense in the spacious interior of the car. With his greedy fingers on a quest for treasure beneath the loose fabric of Sarah's shirt, Rick found his father's lessons at the forefront of his mind. He pressed his mouth against hers, pulled back to catch his breath and then dove back in. His hands went north, hers south and all the while he heard his dad's voice in accented English saying "curse."

Curses were one of the subjects that inevitably came up whenever Jose was around, which wasn't often. Knowledge of curses, it seemed, was the inheritance that Jose would pass on to his son. The lessons in the stories of the curses were not lost on Rick. As he grew older he came to think of his father's life stories as fables, much like the ones he shared with his own kids. They were good for illustrating morals in a simple way. To Rick sitting through them had become a chore he accepted in order to have some semblance of a relationship with his father.

"Today you, tomorrow me" was a lesson that centered behind many of Jose's stories. This particular lesson reminded Rick of a chain letter. It was a sentiment to be passed on and woe to the man that broke it. Rick couldn't count the number of times he had heard the story while sitting on his father's cracked leather couch. The stories had been lighter when he was young, delivered over glasses of milk. As he got older they became the mainstay discussion over beers, his father telling them with increasing urgency each passing year.

"And that's why you shared your lunch with him?" Rick asked. He returned his father's squinty eyed smile.

"Si, it is like the American golden rule..."

“I don’t think the golden rule is unique to America dad.” Rick interrupted. Jose pressed on as though he hadn’t heard.

“Do unto others. But this is different. The man that doesn’t do is cursed and it will come back when he needs help the most. And it’s not just about neighbors, it goes for all. Always help everybody.”

“Mmm hmm.”

“This is important mijo. If you get nothing else from me get this and give it to your kids.”

“What happened after lunch?” He did his duty and asked the same follow up question he asked the last time Jose told him the story

“Nothing happened after lunch. We went back to work. But the next day...” Jose’s voice began to grow louder here. “On my way to work, I didn’t see it, but I run over something and BOOM!” He clapped his hands for emphasis, “My tire blew out.”

He paused and watched his son. Rick nodded at his father to continue.

“I didn’t have a jack mijo. Luckily some black guy came along and saw me standing by my truck with my hands in my pocket. He stopped and helped and I thanked him and I tried to pay him but he said no. So then I tried to tell him about it, about today you, tomorrow me. He didn’t understand though. I could tell by the way he nodded. Still, it doesn’t matter if you understand. If you do it, if you help, then you’ll have help and you won’t get cursed.”

“How do you know the tire blow-out wasn’t you being cursed?” he didn’t know if he was bored with the story or on his way to being drunk, but Rick was feeling antagonistic.

“Ahh see, see son, this is the problem right here.” Jose shook his head. “You make fun of it and someday you’ll ignore it and.” Jose shook his head again.

“Yeah, well, I try to always help people dad.” He wondered though why Jose wasn’t cursed for the disregard he had shown toward his son. Surely the curse has ten-fold power for helping your progeny.

“How’s that pretty wife?”

Rick’s smile disappeared at this.

“And my grandkids?”

“Good dad. Everyone’s good.” Rick reached into his pocket. “I’ve got new pictures for you. Of the kids I mean.” He removed the pictures, stood up and handed them across the coffee table to his father. Jose hadn’t moved from the faded recliner since Rick had come in.

“Good looking kids. Get prettier every time. Hunter looks like you, you know?”

Rick nodded.

“Going to have to watch out for him. He’s going to be tormented by the Castillo Curse, like his abuelito, and his papa.” Jose and Rick both smiled at this.

The Castillo Curse was the first and most frequent story Jose shared with his son.

“I fail to see how it’s a curse dad.”

“See, you don’t think about it, you act like,” Jose shrugged his shoulders, “it’s not real.”

Ever since he was a child his father had told Rick that the Castillos were cursed to be desired by women. Rick assumed that his father told him this to explain why Rick never saw him with the same woman twice. Then Rick had heard it from his abuelito and his tios as well and it became clear that the Castillo men really believed in this. It had always seemed more likely to Rick that the women trouble was a result of their strong jaws, tan skin and thick dark hair. Even though Rick was only half Castillo he carried all these traits.

“You’ll see though,” Jose continued, “One day you’ll see how real the curse is.”

Rick nodded but didn’t say anything. He had started to see it. He saw it in the way the dark haired woman at work, Sarah, smiled at him, the way her eyes shimmered. He wasn’t sure the curse was tied to the women though. He was beginning to think more and more that the Castillo men were cursed to have little self-control. The curse was most visible to him every time he smiled back at her.

*Maybe I can blame all of this on the curse.*

Buttons were harder to operate than he remembered. He was fumbling at them, trying to get them through the holes. Women’s shirts are backwards from men’s, he knew this. But they had never caused him such trouble until now. Sarah laughed.

“Do you want me to do it?” His heart sped at the sound of her voice. Prior to her speaking he feared a heart attack was close. Now he was convinced he had already died. He kissed her to silence her and set back in, hands shaking.

“Here,” She grabbed his hands. Pulled them from her shirt and kissed his fingertips one at a time. Then, she released them and slowly pushed buttons through holes, working from the

top down. Through it all she never broke eye contact and Rick remained motionless. So many lines were crossed already but this line...this was the finish line. Cross it and he was finished. Sarah removed her shirt. Then, she reached around behind her and moments later the treasure he had sought was before him. Rick took a breath.

Rick's breath caught every time he saw Megan holding a baby.

It was a flutter of panic, undetectable to anyone else, but it passed through Rick like the hand of death. He couldn't remember the word, couldn't pronounce it if he could remember it. It was another of Jose's curses. There was a belief that women who often held babies became pregnant themselves soon after. It was different than the American baby fever. According to Rick's Tio Berto being around too many babies could cause a woman's birth control to stop working. For many men, pregnancy wasn't a curse. It was something sought after and celebrated. For the Castillo men, Pregnancy was worse than "El Mal de Ojo." This unspeakable pregnancy curse ran counter to the Castillo Curse. Combined they meant doom for the Castillo men.

Megan smiled at him. She was glowing, her short brown hair fell across her face and she looked so happy that Rick felt the flutter again. He smiled back though.

Ella was two weeks old. Josh and Beth had tried to conceive for three years and now in spite of the dark circles under their eyes they never looked happier. Megan sat between the parents on their living room couch, cradling the sleeping Ella in her thin arms.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Megan asked looking back to Ella now. She didn't wait for an answer. "You are sooooo beautiful."

“She’s gorgeous.” Rick sat away from the three. He was pretty sure he was starting to sweat.

“Do you want to hold her?” Beth asked. Josh and Megan looked up at him.

“No, that’s okay. I’m not even sure I remember how.” The three of them turned their attention back to the baby. “Something about it scares me now.” *And I would tell you about it if I could remember the word.*

*No, I wouldn’t.*

“So when are you guys going to get pregnant.” Beth asked Megan.

“We’re not sure right now.” Megan kept smiling and Rick knew that she wouldn’t betray the flutter she was feeling.

“We already have two kids.” Rick said. “A new baby would be a bit to juggle right now.”

“Yeah, but you guys don’t have any together. And I bet you two would make a beautiful baby.” Beth said. “I think you owe it to the world to make one.”

“Maybe,” this topic couldn’t change fast enough for Rick. He stood up, “Is it okay if I get a glass of water?”

“I’ll grab one for you.” Josh started to get up.

“Stay.” Rick stopped him. “I know where your kitchen is.” He left them cooing over Ella and went into the kitchen. He took a glass from a cupboard and poured water from the fridge dispenser and took a long drink.

Babies had haunted them throughout the first year of their marriage. As soon as they had returned from their honeymoon three of Megan's friends announced pregnancies. Megan was thrilled, she celebrated with her friends. Rick could see a "baby club" forming within Megan's group and Megan wanted to be a part of it. She wouldn't say anything to Rick about it though. They had made a deal nine days before their wedding.

"Five years."

They were lying in bed together. Hunter and Sidney were asleep, the house was quiet and cool and Rick and Megan were spooning.

"Five years," Megan repeated, "and then we talk about it."

He couldn't see her face nor could he read anything in her voice and it worried him.

"I can't promise you I'm going to want more." Rick spoke into her hair.

"I'm not asking you to promise me you'll want more. I'm just asking you not to think about it for now and in five years we'll have a serious conversation."

"What if I don't want another baby in five years?"

"I don't know." Her shoulders moved against him. "That's the point. Neither of us worries about it for five years."

"I don't want you to hate me if I say no then."

"I won't." She pulled his arm tighter around her. "I could never hate you."

Rick knew she was telling the truth.

“I think that’s what I fear the most. Not you hating me...but that you wouldn’t hate me and instead just have this want, this feeling of missing...a void for the rest of your life.”

“Five years.”

“I know, I just...” Rick pressed his mouth into the back of her hair and kissed her head.  
“I’m really scared I’m going to crush you in five years.”

“You can’t possibly know how you’ll feel in five years.”

“I have an idea. In ten years Hunter and Sid will be close to graduating. I don’t want another kid starting school at that time. I’m not trying to push this issue Megan but...that is supposed to be my time. You know, I became a father so young and I just want a chance to be an adult person for a while. Not a father, just solely a person.”

“I know.”

“And you’re going to want a chance to give birth.”

“I know.”

“So we’re just going to let this go unresolved.”

“Five years.”

The baby cried out and Rick choked on his water and started coughing.

“You okay in there?” Josh called out from the living room.

“Yeah,” Rick paused to cough again, “went down the wrong pipe.”



He carried the glass back into the living room with him as Beth took Ella from Megan. Josh grabbed a blanket and started to drape it over his wife and daughter as Beth began to unbutton her shirt. Rick cleared his throat and Megan looked up at him.

“I think we better you leave you guys to it.” Rick said.

“What? Why? Because I’m going to breastfeed Ella?” Beth asked and laughed. “You’re such a wimp Rick.”

“Wimp, decent person, whatever, it feels like a private moment.” Rick sat his glass down on an end table. “And it feels a little awkward.”

“Yeah, Rick’s right. We are supposed to pick the kids up from their mom’s in a couple of hours and we still have a few errands to run.” Megan leaned over and kissed Beth on the cheek. “I’ll come by next week and see you guys again though.”

Rick stepped closer to the couch where Josh was standing and shook his hand.

“Good seeing you both again.” Rick said.

“I’ll walk you guys out.”

They headed through the living room and down the entrance hall. Megan stopped to hug Josh at the door and then the two of them were alone on the porch in the warm May sun. Rick put his hand on the small of Megan’s back signaling her to walk ahead of him. They climbed into Rick’s old Lincoln. Megan leaned across the front seat and kissed Rick on the cheek as he started the car.

Rick’s hands fumbled as he put the keys in the ignition.

He paused and tried to steady himself. Glancing down, he noticed his pants still undone and felt indecent then for the first time. He started to fasten his pants with keys still in hand and dropped them onto the floor of the car.

“You’re all thumbs today.” Sarah said and laughed.

“Yeah, I know. I’m a lot of things today.” It sounded depressing as soon as it came out and he wished he could take it back. He fastened his pants and then reached down and scooped up the keys.

“I’m sorry.” Her smile was gone for the first time that afternoon.

“Don’t be.” Rick started the car. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” He paused to think over his next words. “I like you a lot. I wanted this too and I don’t regret...” He put the car into reverse and spoke without looking at her as he backed the car down the drive. “I’m just not sure what I’m supposed to do now.”

“Hey, you don’t have to do anything.” Sarah slid over the seat and put her head on his shoulder. “I don’t expect anything more.”

“I know.” Rick turned the wheel straightening the car on the country road and braked, and then he put the Lincoln into drive.

He headed north on the old country road and all the while he heard his father’s voice in accented English saying “curse.”