Las Hojas Cortan

(The Leaves Cut)

by Arnaldo Lopez Jr.

 Don Luis bent over the small altar that he’d been working on since early that morning, carefully arranging the statuettes, the candles, and the tiny bowl of offerings on the immaculate white doily that covered the dark, smoothly polished wood of the handmade dais. He heard the tiny bell over the door ring as someone entered the bodega, but he didn’t turn around or look up from his important work.

 “Pop, what are you doing?” His eldest son, Rodrigo, asked in an exasperated tone.

 Don Luis sighed and straightened up, the small bones in his ancient back making subtle cracking noises with the effort. Don Luis was indeed an old man, his son Rodrigo, had just passed his 60th birthday. Yet, Don Luis was no less proud or cognizant, or vibrant in these, his later years, than he was when he was in his thirties. But his son believed the opposite, and spent what seemed to Don Luis an inordinate amount of time treating him as if he were losing his grasp on reality or admonishing him for holding onto the vestiges of the old ways. And Don Luis was sure that more admonishments were on the way due to the altar he’d just so recently and lovingly erected in his son’s store.

 “Pop,” Rodrigo spoke again. “What are you doing?” Rodrigo walked huffily around the counter to get a better look at what his father had put together between the small jars of Vicks and the packets of Bambu paper. It was a tiny altar, like the ones he always saw back home before coming to the ‘States. He took note of the statuettes of various spirits, the candles, and even the upside-down glass of water on a small, white dish. What made it worse was that his father had put it up in the cat’s favorite spot, and even now the cat eyed him forlornly.

 “Pop,” Rodrigo repeated. “I asked you not to do this.”

 Don Luis waved his son’s words away with an impatient gesture. “It is a small altar, a blessing to bring success to your business,” he said.

 “My business is already a success Pop,” Rodrigo explained. “How do you think I was able to afford to bring you here from the island? And I didn’t bring you here all the way from the Dominican Republic so you can drag all of the old beliefs and superstitions with you. This is a whole new world Pop, and over here people put up altars to money – no one believes in this old nonsense.”

 Don Luis shook his head and fought down the urge to slap his son for his disrespectful words. “Cuidado hijo,” he said. “This nonsense, as you call it, is more alive and more real than you can possibly know. Many times it was their blessings that kept us safe and helped keep us fed during lean times. The incense, the cigar smoke, the supplications … this altar, are the humble ways that we give thanks for all that they have done for us. It is because of them that you have this store, and it was their hands that held up the wings of the airplanes that brought us here to America.”

 Rodrigo looked at his father with a growing mixture of incredulity and sadness. He realized that his father was too married to the old ways to change now or even anytime soon. Back home his father had been a well-known and respected priest of the old religion, and people came from miles around for his sage advice and blessings. Rodrigo was sure that his father missed feeling important, and because his love and respect for his father far outweighed his own opinions and ideas of how the world worked – he gave in.

 “Okay Papi,” Rodrigo sighed. “You’re right, you’re right … you can keep the altar. Besides, it’s almost Thanksgiving and we can always use the extra blessings.”

 Don Luis’ face lit up and he smiled, giving his son a loving pat on his cheek. “I knew you would do the right thing hijo,” he said softly. “Your mother would be so proud of you.”

 Rodrigo found himself tearing up at the mention of his recently deceased mother, and awkwardly stepped away from his father while he tried to think of a reasonable excuse for hiding his tears.

 “Uh, Pop,” Rodrigo said. “I’m gonna run downstairs and grab a couple of boxes of stuff we need for the shelves up here. You keep doing what you’re doing and I’ll be right back.”

 “Of course, mi hijo,” Don Luis replied knowingly.

 Rodrigo turned away, wiping his face with his shirtsleeve, walked to the back of the store, and then through the old door that opened to the rickety stairs that led to the basement storage room.

 Don Luis turned back to the altar and said a whispered prayer, seeking solace in the familiar words. The all too recent loss of his wife, Evelyn, and the sudden move to this new land was almost too much to bear. But Don Luis knew that he had to stay strong for the sake of his children – even though they were all grown now. He took a moment to glance out of the large window that made up the front of the store and marveled at the autumnal scene outside. It was the first time that he’d ever seen the leaves on trees change into such beautiful, fiery colors before letting go and falling to the earth. This was truly a magical place.

 The ringing of the bell over the door announcing that a customer had entered the store caught his attention and he turned around – and immediately found himself looking down the barrel of a large gun.

 “Don’t say nothing, old man” the man holding the gun said. “Just give me the money out the register and you won’t get shot.”

 Don Luis glanced in the direction that his son had just gone, but there was no one in sight. Don Luis looked back at the man with the gun; he didn’t call out because he didn’t want the possibility of his son getting hurt.

 “What the hell you looking at old man,” the gunman said. “Give me the damn money now!”

 Don Luis knew what the gunman wanted, and so he reached out and struggled to open the cash drawer where the money was, but he had no idea how to work the new-fangled computerized cash register. He couldn’t open it. His fumbling around enraged the robber, who with a loud curse ran around the counter and struck Don Luis with the gun. Don Luis staggered back and bumped into the altar, sending the carefully placed statuettes and candles crashing into each other. Some toppled and fell to the floor, so Don Luis again turned towards the altar and with trembling hands attempted to repair the damage that had been done, blood trickling from the wound on his face where the robber had struck him and dripping onto the once white doily.

 The gunman grabbed Don Luis roughly by the shoulder and spun him around, pointing the gun directly into his face. “Open the damn register old man, I don’t have time for this,” he growled.

“I don’t know … I don’t know,” Don Luis said haltingly, his mind disoriented, his heart racing.

“Don’t give me that shit!” The gunman hissed as he blindly pawed at the register with one hand while holding the gun on Don Luis with the other.

Suddenly the ringing of the tiny bell over the door announced the arrival of a customer. The gunman looked up at the person who had just entered the bodega, a look of shock and fear on her face. He then turned back to Don Luis and his own face twisted into a mask of rage as he muttered, “Stupid old man.” And then he pressed the trigger.

The gunshot sent the now mortally wounded Don Luis crashing backward into the altar once again, but as he fell he reached out and grabbed onto the gunman’s arm, pulling the surprised gunman towards him.

“Las hojas cortan,” Don Luis whispered in the gunman’s ear with his last, dying breath,

The gunman shook Don Luis off and, pushing his way past the startled customer still standing by the front door, raced out into the street just as Rodrigo emerged from the storage basement and saw his father lying on the floor behind the counter.

Frankie, the gunman who had just killed Don Luis, fled from the bodega in a near panic. He ran for several blocks, turning corners and ducking through alleyways, until he came to a neglected city-owned playground almost hidden under the shadows of some huge overgrown trees.

He sat on a cold, concrete bench, gasping for breath and wiping the sweat from his face. He was angry and scared; the robbery had not gone as he had planned. He didn’t want to shoot anybody, but the old man had pissed him off. Why didn’t he just open the damn register?

Frankie realized that he was still holding the gun in his hand and he quickly tucked it away in his waistband. The shooting kept playing over and over again in his mind, it was all so stupid! And what was it that the old man said just before he died …? Las hojas cortan? What the hell did he mean by that nonsense?

A cold breeze suddenly kicked up, sending dead leaves scooting along the ground and shaking some loose from the canopies of the trees overhead. Frankie shivered, it seemed to have gotten colder than it was earlier, and he chided himself for not wearing a jacket over his hoodie. He turned his face up towards the overcast sky and watched the slow-motion cascade of multi-colored fall leaves as they gently drifted down to the ground. Several of the leaves drifted towards him and he nonchalantly ducked out of their way. One however flew in a little closer than the others and lightly brushed his face … and it *hurt!*

Frankie yelled and jumped up in pain, putting his hand to his face. At first he thought an insect might have stung him, but when he looked at his hand there was blood on his fingers. His blood.

Frankie looked around at the ground; still expecting to find that the culprit was some sort of insect or maybe even an errant piece of sharp plastic. But the only thing he saw were the autumn leaves that littered the ground in their dead, crunchy, fragile multitude. He put his fingers to his face again and winced, it felt like a paper cut and it was still bleeding.

Unable to figure out what actually happened, and hearing sirens off in the distance, Frankie decided that now was as good a time as any to leave the playground and head home.

The playground was surrounded by a tall wrought iron fence with openings on either end. He had entered through one opening and was now headed towards the other one, kicking the piles of dead leaves out of his way. Just as he neared the exit, he felt sharp stings in his feet and more in his ankles and shins. He jumped out of the pile of leaves and stared down at his feet, his imagination conjuring up visions of shards of broken glass hidden in the leaves. He yelped in pain and surprise when he saw that his sneakers and lower pants legs had been practically shredded, and blood was running freely from the various cuts and small wounds he had somehow suffered.

“What the hell …? Frankie murmured to himself as he quickly hobbled away from the piles of leaves, eying them with a mixture of fear and suspicion. His feet, barely covered by the rags that used to be his sneakers, left bloody footprints whenever he placed them onto the ground.

“What the hell? Frankie asked again as he tried to comprehend what was happening. Just then another breeze blew yet more leaves from the trees, and Frankie watched with a mixture of trepidation and curiosity as they meandered down towards the earth. Several of the leaves floated in Frankie’s direction and he watched with growing apprehension as they ever so gently brushed against his arm … and sliced his arm open!

Frankie grabbed onto his wounded arm and howled in pain – it was the leaves! It was the damn leaves! Wounded, in pain and confused, Frankie limped towards the opening in the fence, avoiding the leaves in his way. He was going to get home as quickly as he could, and simply not touch any leaves, and by winter they’ll all be gone anyway. At the opening out of the playground, he noticed that the leaves didn’t seem to be hurting anyone else, he even saw children jumping in and kicking their way through the innocent looking piles of dead vegetation.

So it was just him. The leaves just wanted to hurt Frankie. The old man back at the bodega must have done something to him, or maybe he was just crazy. Maybe God was punishing him. Whatever it was, Frankie knew that he’d be safer in his apartment. So he hobbled his way out of the playground, determined just to get to home and settle his obviously jangled nerves with a beer or two. Then he looked up.

*Trees.*

 The entire block was lined with old maples, oaks, sycamores and ash trees, their ancient branches heavy with leaves that were just showing off the myriad hues of their fall colors. They were beautiful.

And deadly.

Frankie looked around wildly, there were trees in every direction, silent sentinels that had somehow passed judgement on him and were even now waiting to carry out his execution. But no, Frankie wasn’t going out like that. He was determined to make it home alive, he’d run like the devil himself was after him – and maybe he was – and he’d make it home alive and well with maybe only a few cuts and scars to tell the tale.

So Frankie took a deep breath and let it out in a loud yell of defiance as he took off for the end of the block and his home. Almost as soon as he started running, yet another breeze shook the leaves from the trees that lined the sidewalk. A strange crackling, hissing sound behind him caused Frankie to quickly turn his head and see a throng of leaves spinning rapidly at his heels; each one rolling along on its edge like a miniature buzz saw! Frankie screamed and tried to run even faster, “Help me!” He yelled at the people who were just walking by enjoying the fine autumn day. “Help me!” He yelled again, but his fellow pedestrians only stared at him curiously as he limped past them waving his bloodied arms in the air trying to fend off the leaves that were falling all about him and onto him. He grabbed at some of the passersby and screamed desperately in their angry or frightened faces as they pushed him away or avoided him altogether.

Frankie looked up, his face bleeding from hundreds of tiny cuts, and saw that he was almost at the corner. Once off this block, he would be clear of the trees and their goddam leaves! Frankie tried for one last burst of energy so that he could sprint the last few yards to the end of the block, but his lacerated feet and legs gave out and he stumbled to the sidewalk.

Frankie was exhausted, hurt and confused. He still didn’t fully understand what was going on. He slowly worked his way up to his knees, tears coming from his eyes as he cried in pain and futility. He wiped the blood and tears from his eyes and looked around him … millions of leaves of all colors and shapes were closing in and he knew that his own death was now at hand.

“No!” Frankie called out hoarsely as the breeze whipped the leaves into a frenzy. “Help me somebody, please!” Frankie implored the curious, amused, or disapproving passersby that paused nearby or hurried on their way, “Help meeeee!” The leaves now spun and twisted around him like a miniature cyclone, spinning around and around Frankie’s kneeling form until he disappeared from view and his scream died away. After several moments, the leaves slowed down and fell away, revealing the unharmed and unmarked body of Frankie the gunman lying dead on the sidewalk as a crowd gathered to point, whisper, and take pictures with their phones.

The breeze, in due course, returned to the corpse of Frankie the gunman. Softer and warmer now, it sighed sadly and with a terrible finality, “Las hojas cortan … the leaves cut.”