



MARCELO IN THE
REAL WORLD

FRANCISCO X. STORK

Marcelo in the Real World

Francisco X. Stork



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS *An Imprint of Scholastic Inc.*

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CHAPTER 1

“Marcelo, are you ready?”

I lift up my thumb. It means that I am ready.

“Okay, I’m going to wheel you in.”

Then he slides me inside the tunnel of the machine. I like the feeling of being closed in. The lights are not bright enough to hurt my eyes but I close them anyway.

“Don’t forget to lift your finger when you first hear the mental music.” The tunnel has a speaker. Dr. Malone’s voice comes out from there.

I wait for the music. It always comes. The hard part is remembering to lift my finger. There’s a tiny camera that allows Dr. Malone and Toby to see me from up in the control booth.

“Marcelo, Marcelo.” I hear Toby in the distance. I like Toby. He’s a medical doctor just like Dr. Malone but he doesn’t let me call him doctor. Once I called him doctor and he corrected me and said “Toby, please.” His face is covered with freckles.

“Ready for the so-called real stuff?” he asks when he slides me out.

“Yes,” I say to him. The “real stuff” is what he calls the music that is piped in through the speaker in the machine. The music that comes from inside my head is not considered real.

Toby is holding a piece of paper that lists different kinds of real music. “How about choosing from this side, this time?”

“Okay,” I say. The music on the back of the page contains rock songs. That’s Toby’s favorite kind of music. I don’t recognize any of the songs or composers. I finally pick a piece by a composer named Santana because the name looks like Sandoval, my own name. I also like the title of the song “The Calling.”

“Sweet,” says Toby. The smile on his face means I made a good choice. “Santana and Clapton together. Sweet.”

Sweet, I say to myself. I make a mental note to use that word the next time I like something.

A few minutes later Toby is back with the list. He is frowning. “You have to pick from this side. The old man thinks that rock will overstimulate your gray matter.” Toby rolls his eyes while looking in the direction of Dr. Malone, who is up in the booth fiddling with some controls. I do not understand the precise meaning of Toby’s facial expression.

I quickly pick Beethoven’s “Largo” from Piano Concerto No. 3. I like the music’s simple melody. Also, I know it only lasts about ten minutes.

Toby slides me back inside the tunnel.

“What’s the mental music like?” Dr. Malone asks when I’m out of the tunnel. I stop tying my sneakers so that I can think about his question. But it is impossible to put into words what the internal music is like. (I prefer the word “internal” to the word “mental” when referring to the music. The fact that the IM, as I call it for short, is inside my mind does not necessarily mean that it is *produced* by my mind.) What is the IM like? How many times has Dr. Malone asked me that question and how many times have I not been able to answer it?

“Sweet,” I say. “It is sweet.” I look for Toby but he is up in the control room.

“You mean it sounds pleasant? The sounds are pleasing to the ear?”

“The music is not heard with the ears.” Then I realize that “sweet” wasn’t the right word. The music is pleasant all right, but it is much more than that.

“If it’s not heard, then what?”

~~How do I describe it? It is like listening to very loud music with headphones. Only the music seems to be coming from inside the brain. It is actually a very neat sensation. “It is just there,” I say to Dr. Malone. Then an image comes to my mind. “It is a big watermelon.”~~

“Excuse me?” One of the reasons I like working with Dr. Malone is that his facial expressions are so clear and easy to understand. That one he just made, for example, is a textbook example of “baffled.”

I expand on the image that came to me. It is the first time I have made this connection so I am not sure exactly where it will lead me. “When the internal music is there, Marcelo is one of the seeds. The music is the rest of the watermelon.”

Dr. Malone frowns. Actually, it is a half-frown, half-smile, like he is trying to remain serious. “Do you know that you just put emphasis on exactly the right word right then? That’s good. A year ago you couldn’t do that. Paterson has been good for you.”

Paterson. I look at my watch. Aurora is driving me to Paterson after the session with Dr. Malone to see the baby colt that was born last night. Harry (that is what we call Mr. Killhearn, the stable master at Paterson) called this morning and told Aurora that the colt had been born at 2:35 A.M. I pleaded with Aurora to take me today even though she worked all day at the hospital. I could have waited two days until Monday, when I start my summer job taking care of the ponies, but it is too hard to wait. I had hoped to be there when he was being born, and the hours of this day have seemed as long as a week.

I have half an hour left with Dr. Malone, I remind myself. This time, I must make sure that this session does not go over the allotted time, as it sometimes does.

Dr. Malone is speaking again. “But let’s get back to the music. What is the *content* of the mental music? Does it sound like regular music? Does it have a melody?”

“Yes and no,” I say. I hate sounding so imprecise. Imprecision in this case is as close (and as fast) as I can get to accuracy.

“Okaaaay.” Dr. Malone grins. “What part is like regular music?”

I close my eyes and imagine a cello as big as the earth and a bow as long as the Milky Way and the bow moving sometimes slow and sometimes fast across the cello strings.

I hear Dr. Malone in the distance. “Music has a melody, rhythm, beat. Does the mental music have any of these components?”

Now I am thinking about my summer job and how I can be with the ponies all day long. I return to Dr. Malone and his questions. I am getting paid for this, I tell myself. I have to give this process as much as I can. Besides, I like Dr. Malone and I like Toby. “Not exactly.”

“Can you hum it?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not music.”

“It is the feelings of music without the sound.” There. That is as precise as I can get in the kind of language that Dr. Malone is seeking.

“What kinds of feelings?”

I have no idea what to call these feelings. Sometimes the music is lively and fast so I call it “happy.” Sometimes it is slower and lower in pitch, so I call it “sad.” Mostly the music is just incredibly peaceful. Sweet. I like that word.

“Marcelo! Come back. We’re almost done here. Are they always there, these feelings of music without sound?”

“Yes. When I look for them. When Marcelo looks for them, they are always there.”

“When Marcelo looks where?”

“Here.” I touch the back of my head, just above my neck.

~~“Do these sounds ever come when you don’t want them to come or stay when you don’t want them to stay?”~~

I think about it. The truth is that the pull of the music is always there. Like just a little while ago when I was trying to describe it to Dr. Malone, I wanted to slide into the music again. And it is always hard to pull out when I am there. But this is not what I tell Dr. Malone. I don’t know if I could find the right words to describe these thoughts. Instead, I say to him: “If that happened, then Marcelo would be crazy, would he not?”

Dr. Malone laughs and nods at the same time. He is always testing, doing his research but also keeping an eye on my mental health as well. Despite his unanswerable questions and his silly sense of humor, I don’t mind coming to see Dr. Malone. I’ve been doing it every six months since I was five, which means, since I’m seventeen, that I’ve seen Dr. Malone twenty-five times. The visits last two hours and serve three functions: First, he makes sure that my brain is physically okay. Second, the data he gathers helps other people who truly need help. Third, as of last year, I get paid three hundred dollars per visit in accordance with regulations from a grant that Dr. Malone received.

He starts walking toward the control room and I follow him. “This is amazing!” he says after I studies two computer screens. “Come here. I want to show you something.”

I walk over to where Dr. Malone and Toby are standing. Dr. Malone says: “This is an image of your brain when you listened to the real music, and this one shows you listening, or remembering, you put it, to the mental music. See?”

I see two pictures of my brain. Each image has red and blue patches in different places. “When you listen to the real music, both sides of the temporal lobe are activated.” Dr. Malone points to a bright red splash in the front part of my brain on one picture. “But over here, when you listen to the mental music, there’s something going on in the hypothalamus, the oldest part of the human brain. You know, the part that made our cave ancestors fight or flight.”

“The whole limbic system’s lit up like fireworks over here,” Toby says, pointing at the image of my brain listening to the IM.

Dr. Malone stares at me. “You’re definitely absorbed with something, but you’re not thinking.” Then he turns to Toby and says, “Toby, look up those tests they did with the cats, you know, the one where they scanned them while someone dangled a string in front of them. I think the hypothalamus was affected there too.”

I can’t help smiling to myself. I like knowing that my brain is like a cat’s. It reminds me of something my uncle Hector told me once when he was teaching me to lift the weights. He told me to focus on the muscles I was using like a lion watching an intruder approach its den.

Aurora is waiting for me in the reception area. I walk past her, hoping that she won’t spend time asking Dr. Malone about the session the way she usually does. I want to get to Paterson as soon as possible. Harry is not a patient man. He promised me the summer job as stable man when he saw how well I did with the ponies, working with them after school. But there were other kids at Paterson who wanted the job because it is a great, great summer job, and I am nervous about not showing up on time.

But my walking past her does not work. Aurora waits for Dr. Malone, who is close behind me. “Well,” she says, looking at Dr. Malone, “did you find anything in there?”

“Empty, totally empty.” Dr. Malone reaches out to touch the top of my head but draws back, as if suddenly discovering that I am now taller than he is.

“His father wants to send him to a regular high school next year,” Aurora tells him.

I walk back to where Dr. Malone and Aurora are speaking. “No,” I say immediately.

~~“I know how you feel, mister,” Aurora tells me. “I’d like the doctor’s opinion.”~~

I can see Dr. Malone hesitating. He knows how I feel about leaving Paterson and going to regular school. “Of course he’s ready. He could have gone to a regular school starting from kindergarten. Of course he can do it.” Then he looks at me and says, “I’m sorry, buddy.”

I fix my eyes on a spot on the floor while I struggle to find the words to explain why going to regular high school would not be right for me. Then I hear Aurora say, trying to console me, “doesn’t mean you’re necessarily going. Just because you’re ready doesn’t mean we’ll do it. We’ll discuss it.”

“I’m seventeen,” I blurt out.

“Meaning?” Aurora inquires.

“It should be Marcelo’s decision.” I gather up all my strength and lift my eyes to look first at Aurora and then at Dr. Malone. “I should be allowed to finish the last year of high school at Paterson where I’ve always been.”

“Ahh, I think I’m going to stay out of this one,” Dr. Malone says.

“Is Marcelo’s developmental age the same as other seventeen-year-olds?” I’m looking at Dr. Malone.

Dr. Malone nods. That means he understands the nature of my question. “Developmental age. What does that mean? Everyone is different. In some respects you’re about fifty years ahead of other kids your age.”

Aurora smiles.

Dr. Malone never likes to give easy answers to complicated questions just to make people more comfortable. What I want him to say is that given who I am, I’m better off at a place like Paterson.

“Maybe it will be good to have a different experience,” Aurora says.

“You know how I feel about that,” Dr. Malone says to Aurora. “I don’t believe in suffering. If a kid is happy, understood, and appreciated, he will bloom in his or her own time. Paterson has been good to Marcelo. Look at the results.”

Yesss! Thank you, Dr. Malone, I say to myself.

“Mmm.” The sound is coming from Aurora.

“What does ‘Mmm’ mean?” I ask first Aurora and then Dr. Malone.

Dr. Malone decides to answer the question. “You definitely asked the right person about that. We in the medical profession know all about ‘Mmms.’ I think that in this case, your mother’s ‘Mmm’ means that she thinks there are still some things you need to learn and that maybe, if it were up to you, you would not choose to learn those things. Does that make sense?”

“Yes,” Aurora answers.

“Mmm.” The sound comes from me this time. I do not mean to be funny.

CHAPTER 2

On the drive to Paterson I think about the nine Haflinger ponies that I will be taking care of during the summer. I know every one of their names, their ages, and the birth dates of some of them. I know how hard to work them, how much to feed them, when to water them. I especially know where they like to be brushed. As stable man, I will be in charge of their upkeep, which includes keeping the stable clean the way Harry likes it to be kept, which is to say spotless. Prospective students and their parents are always coming in to see the ponies, and Harry wants to make sure the stables and the ponies are perfect. I am that way naturally, so I am perfect for the job.

But it is not just physical upkeep that I will be doing. As the stable man, I will be in charge of the ponies' well-being. I will determine when a pony should be fed and watered and rested. I will be consulted by the instructors and therapists on which pony is best suited for a kid with a particular disability. The truth is that all the ponies are trained to be comfortable around kids with all kinds of disabilities. Visually or hearing impaired, kids with autism, kids with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, spina bifida, Down syndrome, attention deficit disorder—it doesn't matter, the ponies are always peaceful and even-tempered. The trick, as Harry pointed out to me, is not in picking out which pony will be the most comfortable with a kid but in picking out the pony that *the kid* will like the most. Harry thinks I have a knack for this.

"You are really looking forward to your job as stable man, aren't you?" I hear Aurora ask me. It is not like Aurora to ask me unnecessary questions. Of course I am looking forward to this summer job, just like I am looking forward to my last year at Paterson. The job of stable man will continue into next year, only next year I will be involved not just with the upkeep of the ponies and the stables but with the actual training of the ponies. Fritzzy will be ready to be trained in early fall. It is an unbelievable process, to take these ponies and get them accustomed to anything and everything a disabled kid can do. No amount of noise or discomfort or even pain will cause them to hurt a child if they are well-trained.

That is why the possibility of attending Oak Ridge High is so troublesome. It cannot be allowed to happen. Arturo needs to be convinced that the best way for me to be like everyone else is to continue at Paterson, where I can learn at my own pace, where I am learning to make decisions and becoming responsible and independent, all the things he wants me to be.

"Aurora knows the answer to that question. Why does she ask?" It is possible that my words sound rude, but with Aurora I am at ease and can speak in a natural way.

"It is just that..." She pauses. A pause in the middle of a sentence, I have learned in my Social Interactions class at Paterson, can mean that the person speaking is about to say something that might hurt the feelings of the listener. In my chest, I feel a twang—a discordant note, like when the string of a guitar breaks in the middle of a song.

"Arturo." I mean to form this as a question but am unable to do so.

Aurora does not answer. I do not pursue it. We are entering the Paterson grounds and I always make it a point not to talk as we enter Paterson. I have been coming here since first grade, and I still get a sense that here at last is a place where I will not be hurried.

To the left as you enter the long driveway is a set of one-story brick buildings that touch each other like a crossword puzzle that has only been partially completed. Sidewalks connect the buildings, and you can tell even from afar that it would be easy for someone in a wheelchair or someone who cannot see to navigate from one building to another.

To the right as you drive in are playing fields of various sizes and shapes. Large oaks and elm

line the edge of these fields so that in the summer you can walk around the edge and never leave the shade. In back of the playing fields are the stables and the riding tracks.

Aurora parks the car in the parking lot closest to the stables and we get out. Jane, one of the therapists, is leading Gambolino and a little girl I don't recognize around the oval track.

The larger circular track is empty. When summer session starts in a few days, the tracks will be bustling with instructors, therapists, kids, and volunteers. The day will start at eight and go until six in the evening. I see Harry in front of the barn, waving at us.

"Come, I want to show you something!" he yells. I begin to run. Aurora speeds up. I already know what he wants to show me so I run past him into the barn. Inside one of the stalls is a newly born pony sucking from the teat of his mother, Frieda.

"He was born yesterday in the middle of the night. Didn't even have to call the vet. Out he came as easy as the morning sun."

"He is sooo beautiful," Aurora says.

I am stunned. I have seen newly born Haflinger ponies before but this one is...sweet. Sweeter than sweet.

"I wanted to call you last night so you could be here, but he came so sudden. When I checked on eleven all was fine. Frieda was breathing a little heavy, but I thought for sure the pony was a week or so away like the vet said. Then at midnight, I hear some barking and it's Romulus telling me something's up, and there's the little fellow halfway out, headfirst and all."

Romulus is the German shepherd that my uncle Hector gave to Paterson. He is sitting down next to Frieda's stall, guarding the little fellow. Romulus and I look at each other until he winks at me with both eyes.

"Have you named him yet?" Aurora asks.

"Oh gosh. The kids named him ever since we mated Fred and Frieda. Following with the general Prussian theme, it will be Fritzzy. It would have been Fredricka had he been a she."

"Fritzzy," I say out loud.

"I would have preferred something more like Shanny, short for Shannon."

"Good Irish name," Aurora said.

"But Haflingers are originally from Prussia. The Amish use them in America," I point out.

"And as good a working horse as any and better than most. They'll plow your field all day long and into the night. Perfect for these kids, with their backs broad enough for easy balancing and their centers low to the ground."

"May I sit with Frieda a while?" I ask.

"You may," Harry answers quickly. "She is still a little under the weather. It will do her good to have you next to her."

I open the door to the stall and go in softly and I sit near where Frieda is lying down, her knees folded. Fritzzy is looking for another teat to suck. I sit close enough to her head to touch her but I don't touch her. There's no need to touch animals unless they ask you to do so by the various ways that they communicate: by coming to you, or by lifting their heads toward you, or by the way they look at you. I close my eyes and fold my arms and breathe the smell of hay and of Fritzzy. In the distance I hear Aurora ask Harry if she can talk to him for a few minutes.

On the drive home, I sense that something unhappy is about to happen and my mind is trying to find the source of this foreboding. Aurora asks if I'm okay and she's waiting for a response but I ignore her question and remain silent. Aurora doesn't ask again. She knows that if I want to, I will speak in my own time.

We are halfway home and now I have identified what this strange feeling feels like. It is like ~~when you are going down a staircase in the dark and you don't know where the last step is.~~ I have already managed to pinpoint the origins of the feeling. I remember Aurora telling Dr. Malone that Arturo wants me to attend Oak Ridge High for my senior year. I remember her pause in the middle of a sentence when we were talking about working at the stables. I remember Aurora asking Harry if she could talk to him for a few minutes. I notice so many details of what is happening and remember just about all that I notice, even though sometimes it seems as if I am not paying attention. What is hard is interpreting all the details that hit my brain at once. But sometimes I can do that. Like right now. What I gather from all that I have noticed is that my plans for next year are about to change.

When we are almost home, Aurora says, "Are you remembering?"

"Remembering" is the word that Aurora and I use to refer to those moments when I am listening to the IM or reciting in my mind a passage from one of the many holy books I like to read. When I was a child and prone to tantrums, Aurora would ask me to go someplace quiet and remember. Listening to the IM or reciting Scripture helped to calm me down. Now I choose on my own to "remember," whether I am upset or not. The fact that she asked me if I was remembering must mean that she knows something is bothering me.

After a while I tell Aurora, "Father is wrong."

"I haven't heard you refer to your father as 'Father' in a long time. What is Father wrong about?"

"About going to Oak Ridge High next year. I know that's what you are reluctant to tell me. Paterson is where Marcelo belongs. There I will learn to be independent like Arturo wants me to be. There is where I am learning to function just like he wants Marcelo to function."

"He wants to talk to you when we get home. Be open to what he has to say. Perhaps he is right."

"I am open. I have thought about it more than you know. But he is not right about taking Marcelo out of Paterson."

"He was not in favor of you attending Paterson, but you have been there since first grade. He objected to your visits with Rabbi Heschel, but you have been seeing her every other week for five years now. He didn't approve of the sessions with Dr. Malone. He didn't want you living in the tree house either. Yet he allowed you to do all those things despite his misgivings."

"He was wrong about the benefit to Marcelo of all of those as well."

"What I am suggesting is that maybe it is your turn to trust his way. At least be open to it. Just listen to him with trust. Do you trust your father? Do you trust that he wants what is best for you?"

"Trust" is one of those abstract words that is hard for me to understand. Here I can substitute the word "believe" for "trust" and it seems to work. Do I believe that my father wants what is best for me?

"Yes," I say. "But he is wrong nevertheless."

CHAPTER 3

I get out of the car and head for the back door. I see Arturo in the backyard grilling steaks. I hoped to enter the house without him seeing me. I am not ready for the discussion that I know will take place and I need more time to anticipate his questions and memorize my replies. But Aurora yells at him from the back door.

“Sorry we’re late. We got stuck in traffic.”

He answers her without turning around. “I didn’t see any dinner cooking, so I thought I’d grab something.”

“I’ll make the salad,” Aurora tells him, and goes in the house.

I am about to go in when Arturo speaks. “Marcelo, can I talk to you?”

I walk as slowly as I can. Arturo is stabbing the red meat with a giant fork.

“Not done yet,” he says. He closes the black lid to the grill and sits on one of the white iron chairs. “Sit down for a minute.” He pulls out a chair. “How was Dr. Malone?”

“He was well.” I’m still standing. I’m looking at the red needle of the thermometer attached to the grill. It is moving past three hundred degrees.

“Marcelo,” I hear him call. He is holding a goblet half-filled with ruby-colored wine. I know Arturo is not fond of my visits to Dr. Malone’s office. He believes the tests imply there is something wrong with me, which he does not think is the case. “So, what did the good doctor do to you this time?”

“The brain was scanned while Marcelo listened to music.”

“Try saying that again.”

“My brain was scanned while *I* listened to music.” I remind myself not to refer to myself in the third person. Also, I must remember not to call him Arturo.

“Thank you. Is that right? Real music or the kind you alone can hear?”

Talking about the IM, I have learned, makes Arturo nervous. I attempt to change the subject. “After Dr. Malone we went to see the newborn pony at Paterson.”

“That’s good. But you didn’t answer my question.”

There is no chance of ever changing the subject with Arturo. “Real music,” I answer. It is not a lie. The IM is as real as any other kind.

“How long will these visits go for?”

“They last about an hour.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean, how much longer are these experiments or observations going to go on?” Before I can answer, he says, “I have a proposition that I want to discuss with you.”

I feel my chest begin to tighten. “I am not going to Oak Ridge High.” I can hear my voice tremble as I say this.

Arturo’s face turns serious. I brace myself. I know how Arturo can switch from father to lawyer in an instant. The face of Arturo the father does not come out as often for me as it does for my sister Yolanda. I get more of Arturo the lawyer: his eyes unblinking and fixed on my face, the volume of his voice modulated with complete control. He becomes a person who will lose his composure only if he wishes to.

“Here’s what I would like to propose.” I expect him to pause because he is speaking faster than he usually does. But he goes on speaking as fast as he speaks to Yolanda. “I want you to work at the law firm this summer.”

This is a total surprise. It takes me a while to find words, any words. When I do, I say: “I have

summer job at Paterson.”

~~“You’ll help in the mailroom.” He doesn’t hear or chooses not to hear what I say.~~

“I have a job already,” I repeat.

“Sit down, please.” He points to the chair. I sit.

He moves forward on his chair so that our knees are almost touching. He lowers his voice. He is father now. “Son, I want you to have a job where you interact with people, where you have to figure out new things by yourself. What do you do at Paterson that teaches you what you don’t already know?”

“I will be learning to train the ponies.”

“But this is the stage of your life when you need to be working with people.”

“Why?”

“It is an experience you haven’t had, really. At Paterson you are in a protected environment. The kids who go there are not...normal. Most of them will be the way they are all their lives. You, on the other hand, have the ability to grow and adapt. Even your Dr. Malone thinks this is the case. He’s said so since the very first time we saw him. All these years, it wasn’t really necessary for you to go to Paterson. You don’t really belong there. I know you realize this yourself. There’s nothing wrong with you. You just move at a different speed than other kids your age. But in order for you to grow and not get stuck, you need to be in a normal environment. It is time. Here is what I propose: If you work at the law firm this summer, then at the end of the summer, *you* decide whether you want to spend your senior year at Paterson or at Oak Ridge High.”

Now he pauses. He knows I will need time to sort this out. One summer at the law firm versus a whole year at Paterson. I miss out on Fritzy’s early months, but I still get to train him next year. Arturo interrupts my thoughts. “There’s just one thing.” I see him pick up the glass of wine and raise it to his lips. This time his words come out very slow. “You can do what you want in the fall...” He waits for my eyes to meet his eyes and then he continues. “But this summer you must follow all the rules of the...real world.”

“The real world,” I say out loud. It is one of Arturo’s favorite phrases.

“Yes, that’s right. The real world.”

As vague and broad as this term is, I have a sense of what it means and of the difficulties that entails. Following the rules of the real world means, for example, engaging in small talk with other people. It means refraining from talking about my special interest. It means looking people in the eye and shaking hands. It means doing things “on the hoof,” as we say at Paterson, which means doing things that have not been scheduled in advance. It may mean walking or going to places I am not familiar with, city streets full of noise and confusion. Even though I am trying to look calm, a wave of terror comes over me as I imagine walking the streets of Boston by myself.

Arturo smiles as if he knows what is going through my mind. “Don’t worry,” he says soothingly. “we’ll go slow at first. The real world is not going to hurt you.”

There is a question floating inside of me but I can’t find the words for it just yet. I open and clench my fists as I wait for the question to formulate itself. Finally, it arrives. I say to Arturo, “At the end of the summer, will Marcelo, will I decide where I want to spend my senior year...regardless?”

“Regardless? I don’t follow you.”

“You said that if I follow the rules of the real world this summer, I will get to decide where I go next year. Who will decide whether I followed the rules? I am not aware of all the rules of the real world. They are innumerable, as far as I have been able to determine.”

“Ahh.” It is Arturo the father who is speaking now. “Well, look. The corporate world has its rules. The law firm has its rules. The mailroom has its rules. The legal system has its rules. The real world as a whole has its rules. The rules deal with behaviors and the way to do things in order to be

successful. To be successful is to accomplish the task that has been assigned to us or which we have assigned to ourselves. You will need to adapt to the environment governed by these rules as best you can. At Paterson, the environment adapts to you. If you need more time to finish a test, you get it. In the mailroom, a package will need to go out by a certain time, or else. As to who will determine what it seems to me that for this exercise to have any meaning, there must be something at stake. If you go through the motions and just show up every day and not try, then no, you will not have the ability to decide where you spend next year because you will not have followed the rules of the real world. It seems to me that at the end of the summer, we will both know with absolute certainty whether you succeeded or not. But, if for some reason we disagree, it seems to me that the ultimate decision should be mine. I am the father and you are the son. I will be your boss and you will be the employee. Does that make sense?"

I nod that it does. I never lie. But I do now. There is something about what Arturo just said that does not make sense.

Arturo is waiting to see if there are further questions. He knows it takes me a while to process information. I do have one final question. "How will Marcelo be successful in the mailroom?" I would like to have a diagram or picture of what this means so that I can prepare for it.

"Each assignment given to you will have its built-in definition of success. You have a right to ask for instructions from anyone in the law firm who gives you an assignment. Success will be based on your ability to follow those instructions. I know this is very vague and you would like more clarity. You have to trust me. You are not going to be asked to perform tasks that are beyond your abilities. Do you trust me? I have always been fair, haven't I?"

This time I don't know how the word "trust" is being used. But "fair" I understand. "Yes," I say. It is true. Arturo has always been fair.

"Good," he says. "I will be honest with you. I am hoping that after this summer, you will choose to go to Oak Ridge High. There is a life out there that is healthy and normal that you need to be a part of. So, is it a deal?"

"There are some things I cannot do even if I wanted to," I say.

"Like what?"

"There are so many things I still have difficulties with. I cannot walk by myself in a strange place without a map. I get flustered when I am asked to do more than one thing at once. People say words I do not understand or their facial expressions are incomprehensible. They expect responses from me I cannot give."

"Maybe the reason you can't do those things is not because you are not able to, but because you have not been in an environment that challenges you to do them. Jasmine, the girl who runs the mailroom, will show you the ropes. I've talked to her about you. She'll go easy on you at first. Being going slow doesn't mean you won't need to expand beyond your comfort zone."

I am thinking that next fall, I will be able to work full-time at Paterson training Fritzzy and the other ponies. I can visit the ponies on the weekends this summer. Arturo is basically asking me to pretend that I am normal, according to his definition, for three months. This is an impossible task, as far as I can tell, especially since it is very difficult for me to feel that I am *not* normal. Why can't others think and see the world the way I see it? But after three months, it will be over, and I can be who I am.

"Think about it. Let me know first thing in the morning."

"All right," I say. "I will think about it." I start to walk toward my tree house. Namu, who has been lying at my feet all the time, walks by my side.

"You are getting too old to live in a tree house," I hear Arturo say behind me.

I pretend his words do not reach me.

CHAPTER 4

The tree house was Yolanda's idea. When I was ten, we were in the basement watching a movie called *Swiss Family Robinson*, and that's when it came to her that I should have a tree house. She thought it would be good for me to have a place of my own where I could confront my fear of sleeping in a place other than my room. A tree house would allow me to be more self-sufficient, according to Yolanda.

Yolanda went to work immediately. She found a Web site dedicated to tree houses and downloaded plans for one of them. The next morning she took the plans to school and convinced her high school shop teacher to make the construction of the tree house a class project.

The construction was easy. Yolanda's class even built a dog house for Namu under the tree house. The hard part was convincing Arturo to let us build it. He thought that the tree house would make me even more isolated. It took a lot of convincing but Aurora and Yolanda finally got him to agree. I still don't know how. Arturo's only condition was that electrical and cable wires be installed by a licensed electrician.

The entrance to the tree house is through a trapdoor on the floor. To enter, you have to climb a ten-foot rope ladder, lift open the door, and then swing yourself up by the force of your arms. I climb up now and lie down on the cot. My fists open and close the way they do when I am angry. I don't know what to do. I'm too restless to lie in the cot. I get up and sit on the desk chair. On the desk I have a CD player, headphones, and my laptop. I stand up and open the two windows. I sit down again and I am about to grab the headphones when I hear Aurora's voice.

"Open up, I'm going to fall."

I open the trapdoor and see her barely holding on. One of her hands holds a plastic bag with a sandwich and the other hand is holding on to the rope. I take the plastic bag from her and help her up.

"Whew," she sighs when she's in. "You don't make it very easy for people to visit you, do you?"

It occurs to me that she has only been in the tree house one other time. The afternoon that Abuelo died, she came up to let me know.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"No."

"Your father told me that he talked to you about working at the law firm this summer."

"You already knew he was going to talk to me about that. That is the reason why you asked Harry if you could talk to him for a few minutes. You wanted to tell him Marcelo was not going to be working there this summer."

She lowers her eyes and then raises them again. "It was important that your father be the first to tell you. He has looked forward to this for a long time now. I told Harry we would call him tomorrow and let him know. It is still your decision. Your dad said he gave you a choice."

"Working at Paterson is what I want."

"Do you see his point of view, though?"

"I see his point of view. But he is wrong."

"Tell me why you think he wants you to work at the law firm."

"It is the real world."

She laughs. "You're getting pretty good at making funny faces."

"It was not my intention to be funny."

"Your father wants you to try this type of work."

"Mailing letters in the mailroom."

"But it's not just that. He wants you to experience going to work and walking from the tra

station to the law firm by yourself and interacting with people who are...regular people. I've met Jasmine, the girl you'd be working with in the mailroom. She's only a couple years older than you. You'll like her."

"The children who ride the ponies at Paterson are regular people. Harry is extremely regular people."

She lifts herself from the floor where she is sitting and walks over to the desk chair. When she is sitting down again, she says, "Remember when I first took you to the hospital with me? You were about nine, ten?"

"Marcelo was eight years old the first time."

"That little? I went to see Carmen. Remember Carmen? I went on a Saturday, even though I had the day off, because I knew she was in bad shape. I took you with me and left you in the playroom. When I came out, there you were, building a Lego castle with two other little boys. You weren't talking to them or even playing with them really. Each of you was quietly building the castle, side by side. You know? Then after that you did all you could to go with me to work. You felt comfortable with those little children."

"Carmen, Joseph, they all died."

"Yes. I thought it was good for you to be around the children. And it was good for them. They liked you even though you hardly talked to them. You calmed them down just by being with them."

"Marcelo listened to them." For some reason, I slip into the third person with Aurora.

"But then you were always asking me to take you. I thought it was great for you and for the children. But now I have doubts."

"Doubts."

"About whether it was all right to let you be around so much suffering, so much death."

"Suffering and death do not affect me the way they seem to affect others."

"No?"

"They are part of God's universal order."

"It's just that kids your age don't generally think thoughts like that. They're interested in other things, in being with their friends, in having fun. Your father would like you to experience a little of the world most people live in."

"What world do most people live in?"

"Paterson and even St. Elizabeth's, for all the suffering that you see there, are protected environments. What you do at Paterson with the ponies and the children does not take you beyond your 'comfort zone,' as your father says. It doesn't challenge you or help you grow in the areas you need to develop in order to be self-sufficient. Do you understand?"

It takes me a few moments to absorb what she is saying. Then I say, "You think a seventeen-year-old should be more self-sufficient than I am."

"At Paterson you contribute by just being yourself. It is easy for you to be around the ponies and the kids who go there and to interact with them as much as you are able. The job at the law firm will require new skills from you, and you'll be around people who are not always nice."

"You think I interact well with ponies and children because I am still a child," I say.

"You are childlike. And that makes you who you are."

"But?"

"You need to learn how to survive." She seems sad when she says this.

"Marcelo is afraid."

"I know. That's the point. You're not afraid at Paterson, are you?"

"No."

"So it will be good to take on this challenge and overcome it, like you've overcome so many

other challenges already.”

~~I open and close my hands rapidly. “I do not want to work there.”~~

Aurora is quiet. She closes her eyes and I think that maybe her efforts to convince me have made her very tired. When she opens her eyes, she asks: “Did I ever tell you about Mr. Quintana?”

“No.”

“When I was your age, I had a summer job as a nurse’s aide at the Thomas Jefferson Hospital in El Paso. Mr. Quintana was an old gentleman with pancreatic cancer. He was recuperating from a bout of chemotherapy and was waiting to see whether the treatment had done any good. No one really believed that it had because pancreatic cancer is so deadly. But he knew there were a few good weeks after the treatment where he would feel more or less well. After that, there would probably come a final decline. Anyway, one day while I was cleaning his room, he asked me if I had my driver’s license and I told him that I did. Then he asked me if there was any way that I could take a trip with him to this amusement park that was supposed to have the scariest roller coaster in the country. I said that all his life he had never been on a roller coaster. He was terrified. But he didn’t want to die without taking a ride on one. While he was in the hospital he had met a couple of kids who also had cancer, and he wanted to take them on the trip as well. All he needed was someone who could drive.” Aurora stops to see if I am listening. But she knows that I am and she knows what I will ask next.

“What happened?”

“A little miracle, I guess. I said that I would go with him if my mother agreed, knowing full well that Abba would never agree. But then when I mentioned it to Abba she did not say no right away as expected, but instead said that she would like to meet Mr. Quintana first. I never, never in my wildest dreams thought she would even consider it.”

“And then?” Part of me wants to figure out why Aurora is telling me the story but another part just wants to know what happened.

“She met him and afterward she said it was okay. It was an incredible response—from Abba. But I took the fact that she agreed so easily as a sign that the trip was meant to be. So off we went on this crazy, scary, exciting, painful, joyful adventure. A dying old man, two kids in temporary remission from cancer only a year younger than me, and a seventeen-year-old girl who had never been outside Texas. The four of us in search of the ultimate roller coaster ride.”

“And everyone rode the roller coaster.”

“The scariest one. A big, rattling, wooden-frame roller coaster in Tennessee called ‘The Big Woodie.’ It had a five-second drop with a force of six Gs. But before that, I had to convince Mr. Quintana to try a couple of smaller ones. I was afraid that he would have a heart attack if he did not get used to some smaller coasters first. He was still terrified when he rode The Big Woodie, but he did it. When he got out, I asked if he was okay. You know what he said?”

“No.”

“He said, ‘I’ll tell you when my *bolas* drop back in their sack.’ Then he smiled this huge smile and said, ‘Now I can die happy.’” Aurora laughs to herself. I laugh also. I like it when Aurora occasionally uses bad words. *Bolas*, I know, is a Spanish slang word for testicles. (They also teach these kinds of things at Paterson.) But as soon as I finish laughing, I try to figure out why Aurora chose to tell me this memory of hers at this particular point. I can tell that she is hoping that I will get to the moral of the story on my own. But the story has various messages and I don’t know which one to pick. Is Aurora trying to tell me that the law firm is like a scary roller coaster ride where my own testicles will travel up to my throat, figuratively speaking? I have no idea what this feels like, but I sincerely hope this is not the case.

When she sees that I am having problems responding, she says, “It’s just for the summer. Your father means it when he says that at the end of the summer you will decide where to go for your senior

year.”

“Aurora.”

“Yes?”

“Do others see me as a child?”

“You look like any other young man. Better. You’re better-looking than most. You’re tall and handsome and strong.”

“Like Arturo.”

“Yes.”

“But sometimes I think like a child.”

“You are who you are.”

“If I am who I am, why is it not possible for me to work at a place where I can be who I am?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “You’ll learn new skills and ways to deal and cope with life at the law firm.”

“Different from what I can learn at Paterson?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

She pauses. She takes a deep breath before she speaks. “A couple of months after our trip, Mr. Queen—that’s what we called Mr. Quintana—died. That’s when I decided that I wanted to work with children who had cancer. I always wanted to be a nurse, but it was after that trip, during his funeral that I decided what kind of nurse I wanted to be. Of all the types of nursing, this was the one that scared me the most, but also the one where I was most likely to say at the end of my days, ‘Now I can die happy.’

“But I realized that in order to work with children I needed to be gentle *and* strong. Gentle and caring with the children, but strong and tough with all that threatens to increase their suffering or diminish their chances to be healed. At St. Elizabeth’s sometimes I have to protect the children from arrogant or even negligent doctors. Sometimes I have to protect them from the so-called ‘healthy.’ I protect them from hospital bureaucrats, from insurance companies. Sometimes I have to protect them from their own parents. I protect them even from their own negative thoughts at times. I wouldn’t be able to do that, to protect them, unless I was an adult, unless I was strong, unless I was willing to fight for them. Do you see?”

“Yes.” It is true. I see how Aurora is gentle and strong. Then I add, “I do not want to go to Oak Ridge next year. A regular high school is not for Marcelo. I do not fit in. Aurora just said that Marcelo does not think about the same things that most other kids think about. At Paterson, the kind of things I’m interested in or the way I think do not matter. I can learn better there where there is no concern about how Marcelo is different. Aurora was able to choose on her own what she wanted to do. Aunt Abby didn’t tell her that she couldn’t be a nurse. No one prevented her from working with children. After Paterson I want to be a nurse like Aurora and work with Haflinger ponies and disabled kids. I do not see the difference.”

She grins. “Just then you sounded very much like your father the lawyer.” Then she stops grinning and nods that she understands. “You won’t have to go to a regular high school in the fall—that’s what you decide. And after that, well, no one will prevent you from choosing your own path. If you want to do what your mother does, heaven help you, no one will stop you.”

“Arturo said that I will get to decide only if I succeed in following the rules of the real world for three months.”

“Work in the law firm and do your best to be helpful. That’s all you need to do. You will decide.” She stands up and holds her hand over my head and then she tousles my hair. “Now help me down,” she says.

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