

Manchild in the Land of Promise

Aldeo sat pensively across the tiny kitchen table, trying to identify the unfamiliar anxious smile deforming his mother's lips. For much of his childhood Aldeo had served as a surrogate adult ear for her in between parades of transitory relationships. The kitchen table was their ritual meeting place, where years of talk over milk, coffee, and tea had left a collage of stains on the laminate surface, each its' own signature of a past discussion.

As had become her custom before such discussions, Truda prepared the teapot; but this time her hands trembled as she tried to set it down on the stove's fire, creating a grating, rustling sound as the two metal surfaces met.

"Mama you have to tell me what is troubling you!" Aldeo demanded.

He had become accustomed to taking control of their conversations when the need arose. Truda had become dependent on her son's advanced maturity through the years. At 7 years of age Aldeo had learned to steal bread so they could eat; at 12 he was forcing men, whose sexual advances she had decided to decline, from their home late at night with an aluminum baseball bat and at 17 he was comfortably ensconced in his own concept of manhood.

Truda sat at the table and began fumbling with an old worn-out shoebox in front of her.

"What I have to say to you is not easy Aldeo."

As she spoke, in her nervousness, she nearly tore an edge off of the top of the tattered box.

"Mamma," he said in a childlike singsong pattern betraying his maturity, "you never have to be afraid when talking with me."

He reached for his mother's hand across the table and she offered it, resting palm down on the table as he tried to comfort her with his touch.

He sat up straight and tall encouraging her, "tell me what it is that you are afraid of mamma, I will protect you."

There was an unmistakable pain in her eyes as she began to speak, an unrecognizable torment planted itself somewhere deep within her.

"What I have to tell you is about your father."

Aldeo winced uncontrollably, suddenly experiencing disquieting tremors as his body involuntarily contracted within itself. This was the one topic that pushed a dark anger in Aldeo to the surface. His father had abandoned he and his mother when Aldeo was only six years old. The ghost of his father's image driving away still seared emotionally just as it did when he watched it happening as a child. That was the last time he saw or heard from his father. By invoking his father's name, Truda knew that she was cutting deeply into tender lesions that had never completely healed for her son.

“Don’t you dare talk to me about that BASTARD!” he roared at his mother pounding his fist on the table.

Aldeo experienced an immediate, deep sense of regret at his words and actions as his mother withdrew in fear.

It was only during discussions about his estranged father that his mother allowed him to curse in her presence. Truda had exercised great tolerance, over the years, for the unrestrained volatility exhibited by her son at the mere mention of his father’s name.

“Aldeo,” she pleaded, “you must listen; you have to hear what I have to say!”

As she continued to speak she began nervously pulling at the decaying edges of the old shoebox once again.

Aldeo sensed the anxiety in his mothers fumbling with the box and lowered his tone to a more respectful level.

“I’m sorry mamma,” he murmured in deference in that childish, singsong timbre that he knew brought his mother comfort, “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Tears began to form in Truda’s eyes as she continued speaking.

“Aldeo,” she paused to sniffle and rub her nose, “people must be forgiven sometimes for what they do, for the choices they make in life. Your father...”

Aldeo cut his mother’s voice off midsentence, “but mama he chose to leave us, I will never forgive him for that! We have lived in the streets, gone without food because of him...”

Truda listened to her son but more anxiously and nervously then ever she tugged and picked at the frayed, worn box in front of her.

“You cannot ask me to forgive him. In my eyes he is not a man.”

Truda slowly slid the exceedingly creased cardboard shoebox across the table towards her son. In her dread filled state of anxiety, she had torn off an edge of the lid.

“This is yours,” she mumbled as she stroked her son’s hand reaching for the box.

Truda’s eyes began to swell and then a flood of tears let loose as she desperately choked back the gripping temptation to cry out loud.

The shoebox was old, battered and extremely creased after having suffered under the hands of many previous inspections over the years. Aldeo had never seen it before.

The whistling of the teapot interrupted the thick tension in the air as Truda leaped from her chair and ran over to take it off of its’ burner. She quickly returned. There would be no tea prepared today.

Aldeo took the cover off of the shoebox. Inside was an old polaroid picture on top of a menagerie of unrelated objects: yellowing folded pieces of paper, a pair of glasses, unused shoulder patches of military insignia and an old, beaten-up, dog-eared paperback book whose pages were turning brown at the edges.

Aldeo looked up from the box at this mother, “I don’t understand mamma, this is not my stuff. Why are you giving me someone else’s junk?”

Truda could barely speak through the torrent of tears streaming down her cheeks but in a barely audible, broken voice but she managed. She mustered up the courage to tell Aldeo that the picture in the box was a picture of his “real” father.

The words “real father” sucked the air from Aldeo’s body, forcing him into an unfamiliar dark place in his head where he suffered a reverberating, painful silence.

He slowly lifted the picture out of the box. The man in the picture was in a military uniform and wearing the very same glasses buried in the bottom of the box. Aldeo stared long, silently and without a single thought in his head as his mother began talking in a shaky, cracked voice, “That is your “real” father...”

As Truda continued speaking, her voice became muffled sounds Aldeo could only perceive, as if his head were submerged beneath the waters of a deep lake. Abruptly and, without warning, the quiet, unfamiliar, dark place in Aldeo’s head was invaded violently by a rapid, spastic and sporadic succession of images, words and moments simultaneously rewinding and fast-forwarding through the last 17 years of his life.

Somewhere between the unrestricted reeling of images and words running through his mind, there surfaced a thought. He realized that he had been possessed by a seething hatred over all of these years for a man who was not his “real” father. The phantom that had driven away from him 11 years ago had been an illusion, a mirage. This thought and many others like shook the earth beneath Aldeo’s feet.

Truda was now crying uncontrollably, repeating incessantly, “Forgive me Aldeo; please forgive me...”

In his mind, thoughts competed with sounds, each alternating forcefully back and forth between one another. Beneath the glasses was a large, folded piece of fragile paper discolored by age. Aldeo unfolded the piece of paper carefully. He now realized that everything in the box had something to do with some aspect of his life. He unfolded the paper and saw that it was a birth certificate containing his first name and his mother’s maiden name. Truda’s name was on the line that read “mother.” The line that read, “father” was blank. The word bastard joined the barrage of unruly thoughts unsettling his mind, having a new context, taking on new meaning.

“Forgive me Aldeo, I love you son, please forgive me...”

His mother’s voice rose and then faded off into the distance as a never-before experienced fiery pain lodged deep in the pit of his stomach, refusing to surface; it churned a stew of hate, hurt and anger that refused to settle but could not rise. His

equilibrium was lost, the room and table shifted in opposite directions as he sat across from his mother's tear-filled, downcast eyes pleading for forgiveness. He could see her lips moving but he could not hear any sounds.

Aldeo's hands began to tremble as he jerked away from his mother's outreaching embrace. He breathed in and out an acidic combination of disdain, disgust and disappointment for his mother as warm tears began to form in the burning corners of his eyes.

Truda continued the mantra silent to his ears, "Forgive me Aldeo, I love you my son, please..."

The end