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Jipijapa

A single faded white and blue lawn chair sat rusting to the right of the door- Momma's throne from which she observed their street. As she expanded over the years, the bands of plastic stretching across the frame bent downwards, rounded flesh spilling out between the gaps. Most everyone on the street was a fisherman or a wife of a fisherman or a fisherman's child, so in the evenings Momma sat and watched the silent, slow march of rubber-booted men down the muddy street back from the turquoise wooden boats strung together in the Santa Rosa harbor.

Jipi didn't notice when Momma told him her brother was moving in down the street. Momma introduced him as Uncle- a tall, skinny man whose eyes sat back in his head, almost hidden from view by thick brows. He did notice, however, when Uncle's door didn't open at five in the morning, when Uncle's skinny legs didn't join the others on their procession to plunder the sea, when Uncle headed the opposite direction down the street and into the jungle, returning hours later with an armful of palm fronds.

"Where'd he go, Momma?" Jipi's arm extended from its lazy perch on his knee, past Momma's yard-throne, and to the door closing behind Uncle, fronds in hand, as he pushed into his house. Momma lifted her hand regally to shade her eyes, folds of skin bunching up at her wrist like a telephone cord.

"Getting palms to weave hats with. Panama hats." She shifted her head, eyeing Mrs. Garcia's freshly painted door. "That paint is ugly, yes, Jipi?"

Jipi didn't comment on the new coat of plantain green. Instead, he began to watch Uncle. When Momma invited Uncle over to dinner one Sunday, Jipi sat straight in his chair, feet dangling inches off the cement ground, and listened. Uncle told Momma how his sales had been going-- one hat to a United States movie star, one hat to a rich man in Quito. They sold, he said, for a few thousand American dollars.

The more Jipi listened, the more he learned. People in the Santa Rosa fish market opted for cheaper, more disposable hats, but still discussed the man who sat at home and wove instead of joining them in the boats each morning. He was a master of the Panama hat- one of the few left in Ecuador who made a true superfino hat- and Jipi wanted to know all he could about this relative and his strange occupation.

Finally, Uncle saw him watching and invited Jipi, with a grunt and a gesture, to come along with him into the forest. The greenery at the end of the street swallowed them whole.

"Com' on Jipi- I'm not bringing you next time, even if your Momma asks, if you keep being as useless as-" Uncle stepped through the forest, sandaled feet planted firmly over fallen vegetation.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Jipi rushed. He pulled himself upwards by a low hanging Ceibo branch. His legs moved quickly, slapping the ground with a juvenile neglect.

When they reached a suitable young palm, Uncle stopped and began pulling at different fronds, testing for tenderness. His wrinkled hands slid along the lengths of jipijapa, pausing where the stem transformed into the scaled trunk, and yanking up suddenly. A taut arm deposited, silent, frond after frond onto Jipi's waiting outstretched limbs.

The mystery of Uncle's monthly trips into the trees had been exposed, but not decoded. Small, curious eyes peering around cemented corners watched for the next month as the jipijapa fronds were stripped to fibers and washed. They hung outside Uncle's house from a thin piece of twine in thick tassels that twisted and tossed about in the wind. Then, one day, the tufts disappeared.

For a few days Jipi's mother found him suddenly industrious- offering to help his Uncle clean, to carry messages back and forth between the two siblings. Jipi's industry stemmed not from a newfound charitable desire, but an interest in what was taking place in Uncle's main room. As Jipi slowly pushed a broom across Uncle's house, dust storms flew up under his careless movements, but Jipi didn't mind. His black pupils were trained on Uncle's hands, where deft fingers danced.

Months later Uncle boarded a bus and sat, box in his lap, rocking with the hulking frame as black smoke spewed into the air and the bus set off to Manta. The box held the hat that would make Uncle rich he had boasted to Momma, happy to be one-upping an older sibling. Momma had listened silently, thinking of Jipi's growing appetite, and the new, better stove that the Garcias had just bought. Jipi took it all in, fingers itching to pull the fibers of the palm through each other instead of hauling in rough briny nets of flopping fish all day. He was getting to the age when the other boys dropped out of their small school, opting to join their fathers on the ocean.

The bus to Manta ran every hour, on the hour. These were the facts of life in Santa Rosa, and everyone knew them. Momma's watch from her chair a week later in the evening was punctuated by the return of the men from their boats, dredging from their day's work to home.

The one man she did not see, Uncle, brought worry to the fat wrinkles around her eyes. He had been gone a week, and no bus had been delayed.

Jipi scrambled up the wall of Uncle's house, feet slipping as they grasped for hold on the cinder block. He peered in the single window, looking for signs of life, but only saw the block of caco wood used for molding hats, piles of split and boiled fiber, and white muslin cloth all sitting neatly on Uncle's small kitchen table. The cupboards were empty and Uncle's own Panama hat was missing from its well-worn peg.

With Uncle's absence, the town lost its final, fibrous, connection to an art. The last few superfino weavers of Santa Rosa moved closer to Manta, joining the hordes of Panama hat weavers for tourists. Their pickled hands joined the masses, and Jipi contemplated his own.

Jipi had good hands. They were small, nimble, and able to dart quickly behind Momma's bulging back to grab the last tostones. Jipi looked at his hands again. A dead fish appeared in his pink palms. Its beady eye stared up at him, round, black, and all-knowing. It was the kind of fish one could sell at the market in Santa Rosa, not the kind of fish that he could sell to a United States movie star, or to a rich man in Quito.

Jipi turned down the harbor's beckoning in favor of hat weaving- that one thing from which he could find true joy, and also bring back an age-old tradition to Santa Rosa. And so, one morning, after wrapping his arms around only half of Momma's stomach in a tight hug, Jipi was eaten by the forest. Not in search of his Uncle or with the hopes of getting lost, but in search of his namesake, the Jipijapa.