Josue Alvarez Has Blue Eyes and the Most Hispanic Name

SHORT STORY

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People were always surprised when they saw Josue, the large fat white man with a white nose and a white head and the most Hispanic name. Josue didn't identify as Hispanic, but he had a lot of its character. He had memories of Alma in the kitchen and her hands in some masa— dough, with corn. His first job in high school was working at a taco truck where it was so hot he would start to sweat oil. His first love was a dark-haired Cuban girl called Rosita. He spoke Spanish, but only out of necessity because Alma could not speak a word of English. When he was little he had never been able to say Amá like all the other Mexican kids, and instead stuck an "l" in between the "A" and "m." Alma thought it was sweet, the way her son was calling her the Spanish word for soul, and so she never corrected him.

Josue avoided saying his name. Sometimes he told people his name was Bob because it was the only white name he could think of, and they looked at him strange, a little funny, a smile somewhere on the corner of their mouths. But it was less strange than when he said Josue, because there was so much confusion, especially when he said it well with the emphasis on the "u" and the accent.

Josue didn't know where he got all this whiteness. Alma was brown, he thought at least. She was tan, a little bit dark but not very dark. It was mostly the shape of her nose and the way her eyes were a little bit thinner than a white person's that told a person that there was some indigenous in her; and when she opened her mouth with her thick Spanish accent where every "r" rolled and she said "Ay" in between every three words, there was no escaping how Mexican she was. Josue had never seen his Papa, so maybe the whiteness came from there. Alma never let her son say he was white. She told him every day, "Mi niño, tu no eres blanco. Tu piel si, pero tus ojos no. (My son, you're not white. Your skin yes, but not your eyes)." Which Josue never understood because his eyes were blue. But Alma always loved his eyes, how perfectly crystal blue they were. She thanked God every day that even though her son was ugly, his eyes were beautiful. When he was a baby she used to spend all day staring at him, peering into those eyes, so in awe of the way they reminded her of the sea, waves crashing where his iris met his pupil. If he looked hard enough in the mirror maybe Josue could have seen a little bit of Hispanic, in how thin his eyes were, but Josue never did look in the mirror to search for some Hispanic, and so he stayed a white man; and Josue was happy that way, he liked being a white man.

Alma left the two-bedroom house in the trailer park between Highway 80 and South 32nd Street only once a week on Saturdays when Josue would drive her to church for Hispanic mass at five. Hispanic mass was the closest Alma had ever come to feeling an emotion. Sometimes she felt something tug at her chest when she prayed, something warm that made the back of her throat dry and the corners of her eyes itch. But she always thought it was God placing his hand on her chest, on the back of her throat, wiping the corners of her eyes with his thumbs.

After high school Josue had started to work full time at the taco truck. He was 18 and when he thought about the future it swallowed him whole, and so Josue avoided change. He had always hated learning anyways. In high school only English excited him, because writing had felt necessary. But writing took so much time, and at the trailer home between the interstate he could only focus when

the sound of Alma's telenovelas died down in the living room. Alma never had much imagination, but sometimes she let herself dream that she wore red dresses and had pretty brown doe eyes like the women in the telenovelas, and it made Alma never want to open her eyes. Josue watched his mother daydream, and sometimes he wondered if his mother was high on something or if she was taking too much of the Vicodin she got for her lower back pain.

When Josue was 11, Alma had worked at a cleaning company called *HappyClean*, which Josue had thought was funny because Alma never looked happy or clean in her swamp-brown uniform. Alma was cleaning the top of a window frame when it happened. The ladder she was standing on was older than her, and it gave out beneath her. Rungs and all, it crumpled. The pain came after. Daggers in her back, as though someone spent all day stabbing her and ripping out the blade and stabbing again. She would lie on the floor of the trailer home and scream. Josue would crawl next to her, place his hand on her belly, and cry. A year later she was on disability and had a pension, and most of all, she had Vicodin. Vicodin kept her alive. Alma lived for three things after that: God, Josue, and the little white pill she took every six hours— in that order. But it felt like she lived less and less for Josue every year, and more for the little white pill. So Josue could only sleep when he heard the murmurs of the television begin to die down, and he set alarms for three a.m. when the traffic was quiet. But Josue could never stay awake long enough to write pages, and so his writing, like all the things he did, never went anywhere.

After failing to find meaning in high school Josue worked full-time at the food truck. Rosita said he was going to become one of those bitter men that never did anything with their lives. Josue loved the thick black hair that fell down her back. Rosita, like many Cubans, was almost as white as he was, whiter even. But Rosita wore her Cubanity in her hair, in her clothes, in the way she moved her hands and smacked her lips. Rosita spoke broken Spanish, more Spanglish than Spanish, it was one of the things she hated about herself. Josue didn't believe in God, but sometimes he thought that if God did exist, he had given him perfect Spanish in exchange for all his whiteness. Josue spoke English and he sung Spanish, it slipped off of his tongue, syllables blending together, everything melding so well that some even forgot to wonder why a white man was speaking their language so beautifully. But life had given Rosita so much more than it had given Josue, and Rosita knew that. She was pretty for one, not beautiful, but pretty. The kind of conventional attractiveness that made people pay attention to her when she talked to them, that made them fall in love a little faster than they normally would. Rosita's family, like Alma, were strict Catholics. But even though Rosita hated the Catholic church, she prayed almost as much as Alma did. She prayed in the back of the food truck on her breaks. It was the only time she would try to speak only Spanish. Josue would hear her soft Dios, Dios, Dios as he took orders.

On the first day they met, when they were driving the taco truck back to the only Mexican restaurant in town, Rosita told Josue she wanted to run away from her parents, from the suffocation. They were both 16 and Rosita was driving the food truck illegally, which the owner never really seemed to mind because the police had better things to do than to pull over a food truck that wasn't capable of speeding in the first place.

"You must get it though, you're Hispanic too," Rosita had said on that first night in the food truck. She was the first person who knew immediately that Josue was Hispanic.

"Your eyes," she had said after Josue had asked her how she had known.

"They're a little thin. White people don't have that."

"So I don't look white?"

"Oh no, you're white as hell." Rosita had laughed at herself, her gum stuck between her teeth and her cheek, hoops dangling, lipstick a little smudged.

Falling in love with Rosita was easy— Josue just had to let it happen. He fell in love with her smile, with her neck, with her cheeks, with the red lipstick that was always smudged somewhere in a corner. Josue held out hope, that maybe if he made her laugh enough and listened to her problems that she would look past his fatness and see his smile and the crystal blue eyes that Alma swam in every time she looked at her son, and maybe she could like him. They spent their teens like that. 16 on 17 on 18 on 19, cramped weeknights in quiet street corners

enveloped by the smell of beef in consomé and sliced onions and jalapeños.

The older Josue became the more he came home to his mother on her chair, head snapped back, eyes rolling side to side. What was one white pill every six hours became one every four, and then one every three.

"El dolor, me está volviendo. (My pain, it's coming back)," Alma would whisper while standing in the kitchen, her hand pressed gently into her back. Then she would swing back three pills.

Josue kept writing sentences and paragraphs. He found that he wrote more, better, the more he found Alma's neck bent back on her chair, murmurs of an episode of the telenovela in the background.

Driving My Mother to Get Vicodin by Josue Alvarez

I drive my mother to get Vicodin at 3:15 p.m. on a Friday. We are alone except for the sound of rain on the dashboard. I can see the way she sits, arms crossed, black hair going gray. Her eyes are somewhere far away. Can God be cruel? I think so. I call my mother the Spanish word for soul and yet she has none left.

Josue had shown it to Rosita and her eyes had widened with every word and every sentence. "Holy, holy shit Josue. This is good, it's good!" The piece of paper had crumpled a little in Rosita's hands because she was holding it so tightly. She was looking Josue in the eyes, hers were so bright, a glaze that slipped over them made it almost look like she could cry.

"Josue, look at me. Dude you can go places, do shit. You can get out of this hell hole and go do something." Rosita had grabbed the side of his arm and was smiling the kind of smile that made her whole head shake, and Josue wondered if she was talking to him or to herself. But Josue didn't want to leave a woman he knew was being held together by the color of his eyes. He was 18 then and every time he came home he would find Alma there on his bed, wrapped in his bed sheets, Vicodin on the side of the bed. He tucked her in sometimes, wrapping her in blankets as though she was a present. These were the only times Josue prayed, asking God to make her better.

Sometimes Alma would break from her Vicodin trance when she would smile or laugh a certain way, and Josue thought he could see the light in her eyes again. Alma would jump up sometimes when she laughed, and once she fell into a heap on the ground the fourth time she pushed her body into the air. Alma had put her hand on her back and screamed so loud that Josue thought the entire trailer park could hear, tears of unhappiness beginning to form in the corner of her eyes. She had sat that way, screaming and kicking her feet and crying at age 42, her 19 year-old son standing above her. It was the only time Josue ever wanted to run away, to drain the gas on the interstate at 105 miles per hour. But Josue stayed and he kneeled onto the floor and he took Alma into his large arms and held her until her breathing lulled, slow and soft and steady, until she closed her eyes and slept instead of wept; and then Josue carried her, as though he had a womb, as though she was a baby that he had birthed. Josue never saw Alma as a mother again. Instead every time he looked at Alma he saw her cheeks and her thick legs and all he could think was that she was a child and that he had become a father, forced to adopt an overgrown baby. So when he peered into her casket on the eve of his twentieth birthday, all Josue saw was a baby; and Josue didn't cry, not a tear fell from his crystal blue eyes. Alma had died long before Josue peered into her casket. Josue didn't know if it was possible to begin dying when still alive. He thought it must be, because really, all of life was a process of dying, a slow decomposition. But Josue knew Alma had started dying there on that day in front of her telenovelas, daydreaming of red dresses and brown doe eyes.

A year later Josue was sitting thigh to thigh in the back of the food truck with Rosita, bodies squeezed together, arms touching, legs dangling. They sat silently that way, touching, still conscious that their skin was rubbing one another, a long time. Rosita drove Josue home that day, and they drove like they did on that first day when they were 16.

"Josue."

"Hmm."

"It's been a year."

"Since what?"

"Your ma. It's been a year since she died. Don't you want to do something? Your life is pathetic."

Rosita was crying a little now, and Josue couldn't decide if she was crying for his patheticness or at it.

"Josue!" Rosita slammed the car horn and he looked up at her. "You're afraid, you're afraid that once you start caring and doing things you're actually going to have to start putting effort into things. Because you won't be able to half-ass shit you actually care about. Josue, Josue, it makes me so sad. So angry, because you're so incredible and you have all this talent that a shit-ton of people don't have, and you're just wasting away and getting fat and numb, numb to everything just like your ma was when she was drugged up." Rosita was crying so hard that the streetlights blurred, and she couldn't tell if they were still sitting at a red light or if it had turned green, but really she didn't care because Josue was staring at his hands, at the water that was coming from his eyes and staining his skin. Josue was crying because another person was crying for him, not because of— but for, and not even out of pity, Rosita was crying because Josue had things she didn't have, and he never did anything with them.

Someone honked and it took away the blur of the streetlight and Rosita could see that it was green now, bright green, a blinding "Go" when all she wanted to do was stay, stopped next to this large man with beautiful eyes. But Rosita drove, and Josue said nothing. He just looked at the tears that fell, still-life on his hands, and sat with the weight of her words on his shoulders, clamped down on his chest. She drove him to the entrance of the trailer park, and before he left she took his head into her hands and kissed him and left something unwritten there, in her lipstick, that told Josue she would be back tomorrow, and every day after.

That night Josue found himself sitting in Alma's bed, wrapped in the way she used to smell, before the Vicodin, before the dying began. There, wrapped in what Alma used to be, Josue opened his computer to the community college enrollment page. Two months later he sat in a basement classroom with six-inch windows and glaring overhead fluorescent lighting. But it didn't matter because it was a creative writing class, and so Josue could write sunlight into the room. The teacher had told them to write about their family, and Josue had turned the prompt over in his mind, there in his bed, staring at the empty walls.

At the top of a blank page Josue began to write:

Alma, soy yo, tu hijo. Alma, it's me, your son. I used to drive you to get Vicodin. But I don't want to write about the person you were then, I want to write about the before. About the way you used to laugh. Like something warm and thick was coming from your being, and every time it would make me remember why I never stopped calling you the Spanish word for soul.

The words came as though he was full of something, stuffed to the brim, and everything was spilling from his mouth, his nose, his ears, until there sitting on his bed, he was swimming in words. He strung them together, threading words into sentences until they became paragraphs. Then, for the first time in his life, Josue Alvarez finished something. ■