The Big Feed

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The story goes like this: there are those who live in the swampland and those who live in the grassland. The former sing and the latter tell stories. My ancestors have been telling stories for ages and most of them are about the swamp people. We do not speak their language and cannot understand their singing, but we suspect that their lyrics describe us with as much horror as we portray them.

The elders insist that these stories are important because they keep the past alive, preserve the present and predict the future. Some of these tales will make you want to cover your ears, believe me. Kids are allowed to cry, but silently. One must never interrupt the storyteller. I, myself, have cried on many occasions because I’m only nine. As soon as an adult starts telling a story about the swamp people, all sorts of demons start to multiply inside my head. It’s just like that one time when I broke Mother’s mirror and saw my shattered face with all those eyes staring at me. I started weeping. When Mother saw me, she asked if I was ok and I said, “Look,” pointing at the mirror and Mother said: “It’s just you, Diego,” which made that living nightmare even worse. In any case, here, in the town of Karapá, it’s normal for kids to carry shattered brains until we get used to fear. “Fear is like a dog,” Father once said to me. “Either you walk it, or it walks you.”

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I have a dog. His name is Rat. Mother bought him from a drunk carpet seller who showed up one day in the tavern my parents own. I was helping Mother clean the tables. The place was quiet. Father was taking a nap.

“How did you call him Rat?” Mother asked.
“I don’t know,” the carpet seller said. “I was probably drunk. You can try calling him by another name, but, as far as I know, he won’t answer unless you call him Rat.”

“How old?”

“Still young and vigorous,” the man said and stared at Mother’s body from head to toe as if he were following a fly or something. “Are you interested?”

Mother gave the man the same hard look I get when I enter the toilet without knocking and find her peeing. The man stiffened.

“How much?” Mother said.

“Three silver coins and a glass of red wine.”

“We don’t serve alcohol to alcoholics,” Mother replied and then chuckled the way she does when Father tells a bad joke. Mother is truly fond of those.

“Ok. The three coins will do,” the man said.

Mother placed them on the table to avoid touching the man’s greasy hands. The carpet seller dropped the leash and waited for Mother to bend and grab it. But, instead, she asked me to get hold of the animal. I snatched the leash. The dog didn’t care about his new owner and kept licking his left paw. Mother pointed at the door and the man understood that she wanted him out. Immediately. He asked for directions to the capital and Mother told him to follow the gravel path. I knew that the path led to the swampland, not the capital, but kept my mouth shut.

“Oh well,” Mother said as we both watched the man leave town, “a bad joke can’t last forever, now can it, Diego?”

“I guess not,” I said. The man should’ve ignored the fly. Mother doesn’t like people who talk with their eyes wandering upon her body.

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The pup’s whiteness glowed like the fluorescent lights in my parent’s tavern. His lips were gooey and pink. He was and is still an ugly dog, all right. But I am ugly too and have always had a fondness for freaks, be they human or not. I have a twisted leg and Rat... well Rat is a dog that looks and behaves like a Rat. So what? He gnaws, eats cheese, and barks at such a high pitch that it sounds more like a squeal. Even his pointy snout makes him look like a rat. Why wouldn’t he be a rat? After all, his last owner kept calling him that name. “Come here, Rat” “Sit, Rat.” “Good boy, Rat.” One thing is certain, his sharp
fangs are those of a dog. You don’t want to mess around with him. Or me. I’m a cripple, all right, but I have Rat. I must say one more thing: my dog is short legged, and I walk on a crutch. Hence, we both move at the same pace. It’s clear that we were meant for one another. To this day, I am grateful to Mother for such a wonderful birthday present.

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After the carpet seller disappeared, Mother went into the pantry. The mutt began chewing his paw, then got tired of it and began biting my left shoe. I told him to stop, but he wouldn’t. It was a costly orthopedic shoe. I needed it because of my twisted leg. Mother and Father had paid a fortune. Destroying it would truly upset them, especially Mother. She would kill the dog without hesitation as a way of punishing me for my lack of control over the animal. I didn’t want that to happen. The dog was my birthday present after all. I was six at the time, old enough to keep a pup under control. “Stop,” I said. “Stop!” But Rat wouldn’t obey, and I started crying because I knew that Mother would poison the damn animal. “Stop! Did you hear me? Stop!” I jerked the leash and strangled the animal. “I said stop, Rat, stop, Goddamnit!” And the dog stopped. Just like that. He never touched my shoe again.

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It is Holy Week, and soon it will be my tenth birthday. The priest, padre Antonio, stands behind the altar. His massive bald head shines as much as the silver chalice that sits on the sacred table. He is talking about the Romans. No matter how much they tried to twist the body and soul of Jesus Christ, they never succeeded. “Christ persevered even when the world failed him,” padre Antonio says as he holds the wafer up with two gentle fingers, “and so shall we.” Then he reminds us that Karapá means “twisted” in the language of our ancestors. They thought our town was twisted because of all the polio epidemics we have endured since we first settled in this land. “And yet, here we are,” padre Antonio says as he cracks the wafer in two and turns it into a gentle insect with golden wings. “Here we stand, brothers and sisters, strong and proud.”

Every time padre Antonio places the wafer in my mouth, he says, “Body of Christ,” and I reply: “Amen.” It feels like eating a small piece of paper. But it isn’t paper. It’s the body of Christ himself. By eating it, one is granted superpowers.

During today’s Mass, I thought of my dog Rat and how he has become a rat from the mere habit of hearing that word: “rat.” I thought the
following: maybe if I feed him new words, he can change just like the people in Karapá are changed by the words that padre Antonio feeds us every time he places the wafer on our tongues. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” That’s what the Bible says, right?

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I spend all Holy Week scribbling the sentence “You are a dog,” on different scraps of paper that I mix with Rat’s food. I know that the magic won’t happen overnight. I say to myself that I need to be as perseverant in saving my dog as Christ himself was in saving his spirit. Holy Week goes by. I turn ten. No results. I keep going and patiently feed the animal the same sentence for months, three times a day. But Rat keeps gnawing and squealing like a rodent. Half a year goes by, and I realize that I need a new strategy—a more drastic approach perhaps—to prove whether the experiment is working or not.

It’s a cold November day and my parents are still working in the tavern. I am alone in the living room with Rat, who has curled up by the fireplace. Before I know it, I find myself writing on a piece of paper the sentence: “You are a dead dog.” My hands are shaking. I gasp and think to myself: What if I feed it to him and he dies? That would turn me into a murderer. I can feel an invisible leash tightening around my neck, suffocating me. It’s pure fear, fear of killing. I throw the paper into the fireplace and watch it burn as my breathing returns to normal.

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A week later, the Postman and his people visit us.

“You’ve grown, Diego,” he says. “Look at that left bicep. A weak leg will make a strong man. It sure will!”

I can smell the sweet scent of red wine in his mouth. The Postman carries the liquor in one of those weathered, black wineskins. He always lets me drink from it. I love aiming the red jet at my mouth from a distance and always enjoy feeling the cold liquid hitting the roof of my mouth. Sometimes I miss and everyone—Mother and Father, the Postman and his people—burst into laughter.

His real name is Claudio Onetti, but everyone calls him the Postman because that is what he and his people do: they deliver our mail. He is surrounded by five other men, their faces the color of rust, their hair dusty and stiff, their eyes as lifeless as olive pits. Everyone in Karapá knows how
hard these men work, how much they travel, how many dangers they face. When they return home, we host them as best we can.

The Postman is the tallest of all and every time he visits my parents’ tavern, I ask him to stretch his arms and touch the ceiling. And he does and gets rid of the spider webs in the high corners of the living room. On some occasions, I have even seen him eat some spiders. With the Postman one never knows if he is being serious or playful. He is full of stories about the critters he has eaten and the beasts he has defeated and the mountains he has climbed and the deserts he has explored. He is a fearless man. We used to believe he was made of fire. That’s what we thought when we were kids. When I was five, I used to pull on his long red beard because it was like holding flames, flames that didn’t burn. But I don’t do that anymore because I’m ten now, I’m a big boy, all right, and I must behave like one. Besides, I can tell the difference between fire and hair.

The Postman and his people ride horses, and their dark-brown loose trousers are so worn out that their legs blend into the horse flanks. They wear flat-brimmed black hats and woolen ponchos of earthy colors. Underneath those ponchos, one is certain to find a sharp knife tucked under their leather belt. They use the knife mostly to cut onions, peel fruit and shave. Unless, of course, someone messes around with the mail they carry. You must understand one thing: these letters are our main contact with the outside world. We live in such isolation that getting news from old acquaintances or family members keeps us sane. The Postman and his people will protect these letters with their lives. Everyone knows this. And that’s precisely why everyone trusts them.

“Dog still acting like a rat, huh?” The Postman asks.

“Yes, sir,” I say with downcast eyes.

“Nothing to worry about, kiddo. Hear this: all you need to do is treat him like a dog. Then he’ll become one.”

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

The Postman smiles and his blazing beard spreads in all directions. I keep waiting, but there’s no answer.

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During his last visit, the Postman told us that he had killed a swamp man. He explained that his mind had been twisted by the toxic fumes that the dark waters release.
“The man had gone crazy,” the Postman said. “I killed the bastard before he killed me.”

“They are rotten inside,” said another one of his men, one who was missing three fingers, “Their songs are dark and grim.”

“And they’re dangerous too, those songs,” said a short guy with a hump over his right shoulder. “They will put you to sleep. And there’s nothing worse than falling asleep near water. Easy to drown. Know what I mean?” he said and looked at me with a smile that was missing some of its upper teeth.

I kept reminding myself that I was ten and needed to be strong and behave. I hid my shaking hands under the table. The Postman must have noticed because later that day, before leaving the tavern, he pulled a log from the basket near the fireplace and quickly carved a salamander for me. That’s how good he was with the knife, the very same knife that had killed the swamp man. He said the salamander was magical and would always protect me from the swamp people.

“You have nothing to worry about,” the Postman said and handed me the wineskin as he whispered in my ear that wine would help me sleep.

It didn’t. On the contrary, it fed my imagination. That night, I decided I would become as precise with the quill as the Postman was with his knife and, possessed by a strange tingling in my tongue and chest, I wrote an entire story about the swamp people. It didn’t describe the evil they carry. I was done with those dreadful tales. My story was about the beauty of their songs and the strength of their bodies, the wondrous secrets of the bogs and the miraculous powers of plants and fungi that grow on the marshes. Then I shredded the paper into tiny pieces, sneaked into the kitchen while Mother and Father were asleep and mixed my minced words with the sausage and apple stuffing that was sitting on the stove.

The following day Mother complimented Father:

“Tastes delicious. Moister than usual,” she said.

I was encouraged by her reaction and hoped that my new experiment would work. Perhaps my parents’ understanding of the swamp people would finally change. Perhaps language could truly transform people. Perhaps it would make their hate and fear vanish once and for all.

I was wrong. The experiment failed. Language was useless. Now I know. I am eleven. It’s time to forget all those childish games. I have decided to focus on one simple task: train my dog to be a dog. I have taught him how
to find objects I have hidden around the house. I feed him liver treats each
time he finds one. He has become quite good at that game.

These are good times. The warm weather has arrived, and Mother
has set some tables outside the tavern. Many neighbors come to eat and
drink. The business is thriving. People are happy. I can understand why. We
haven’t had a Big Feed for several months. It is a good sign, no doubt about
that. We usually have one Big Feed each spring, but not this year. The east
winds haven’t blown yet. No east wind, no Big Feed.

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The story goes like this: the first grassland settlers discovered that
they were not alone the day that the east wind carried the sound of songs and
the scent of food. They could tell that other people were preparing a stew not
far away. They tried to understand the origin of these people by figuring out
the content of their stew, but no matter how hard they tried, they could only
detect one or two ingredients. Their songs were made of lyrics my people
could not understand. The unknown made them panic. Men immediately
oiled their shotguns. Women thought they would be raped. Children
believed they would soon become orphans. Where did all this fear come
from? It came from the world my people had abandoned, a place of utter
destruction and despair. Those who still live there and write letters to us say
that not much has changed.

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Big Feeds take place when the east wind blows. We roast lamb on big
grills outdoors to overpower the distant scent of the foreign stew. Men load
their shotguns and fire them into the air to discourage the swamp people
from approaching our land. In response, the swamp people fire theirs. As
soon as the east wind loses its strength, we stop cooking and celebrate the
end of the Big Feed with a firework show. Then we move on with our ordinary
lives telling stories about the swamp people so that no one forgets them. We
know they have weapons, and they know we have weapons. We stay here,
and they stay there.

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Some say that they cook crocodile stew. Others claim it is made of
mud and worms. Nobody knows, but one thing is certain: their stew has
cumin in it. Lots of cumin. I can tell because my people also use cumin,
although not for cooking. We crush the seeds and squeeze all the oil out of
them. It’s a good antiseptic. But God, it smells like horse sweat! The stench is unmistakable.

It’s the cumin that finally paved my road towards the swamp people. I’m fifteen now and I’m going to meet them, all right. I have decided that the only way to control my fear is to get to its core, even if that means breaking the law and walking on the gravel path eastbound. All I have to do now is turn Rat into a cumin addict.

I spend months hiding small pouches with cumin seeds in baskets, chests and drawers. Each time Rat finds the pouch, he sits and wags his tail and waits for me the way dogs wait for a treat, that is, with great excitement in their eyes.

Soon summer yellows the blades of grass and now Rat can find one single cumin seed buried two feet underground. That’s how good his sense of smell has gotten. He is running free because now he and I are allowed to take walks in the countryside. The leash is no longer constraining his neck and Rat has started barking like a real dog. He is a dog, all right, and his name, Rat, is the only trace left of his past life. He is ready for our next expedition. And so am I. We just need to wait for the next Big Feed. When the east wind blows, my cumin-addict dog and I will follow the scent all the way to the swamp people.

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I have come to understand that horror –true horror– is as plain as a bad joke. It leaves you speechless. Mother has always liked bad jokes. I don’t. It’s their lack of meaning that makes Mother laugh hysterically. That lack of meaning has always puzzled me. True horror lacks meaning. Always has. Even when people serve you a bunch of words to justify it. That makes it worse. Words, words, words. Pile of shit. That’s all it is. And there’s nothing more horrific than learning that you have been eating piles of shit for years. Centuries.

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Rat and I have now walked for seven hours straight against the wind. After two hours the grass gave way to dry sand, which got everywhere: my eyes, nose and ears. I had prepared some food for our trip, but it is all gone now. Water? Gone as well. Huge blisters have formed on the palm of my left hand from the crutch grip. Some have exploded. Rat is exhausted. His tongue is sticking out, dry and pale. We’ve made it. I can see the dark waters. As it turns out, the swamps don’t produce any kind of toxic fumes, but a milky
mist that the wind gusts curl and weave into white braids. I am hurt and scared and thirsty. I need to drink something or else I will faint.

We get closer to the water. I see them. They are singing and chopping food and seasoning the stew. Some are sitting on the muddy ground, smoking, their legs stretched, their eyes set on the dark waters. Their horses are bowling and eating grass. Two twisted branches protrude from the big cauldron. Are they branches or antlers? The flames are low under the rusty surface of the huge cooking pot.

I see them and they see me. Rat barks and jumps and licks their hands as they feed him. I can’t understand anything. I say: “Come!” and Rat runs and sits by my heel. He looks at me the way he sometimes looks at his empty bowl of food. I feel as if I have been hollowed out: no guts, no brain, no muscles, nothing. I blink, but the world before my eyes doesn’t change. Maybe I am hallucinating due to dehydration. I mumble the words: “Water, please,” and one of them gives me water. I know the man. I used to think his beard was made of fire. Yes, I know the man, but I still can’t understand a thing. And then the man with the long red beard pats me on the shoulder and says: “You ok, boy?” I can hear the Postman’s words, but I can’t understand what they mean.

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Did the swamp people ever exist? Nobody knows. Perhaps they did at some point and then left. What is certain is that my people kept them there, right around the corner. They kept our fear alive and fed it for centuries. I finally recovered from the shock. It was all a fake game. Fiction, pure and simple fiction to keep my people nervous, frightened, alert. The branches in the cauldron turned out to be branches. The stew reeked of cumin. It contained roots and barks.

“If you want to try it?” said the hunchback with his toothless smile. He offered me a spoonful. “It’s an acquired taste.”

The strong scent cleared my sinuses. Then a sudden nausea took hold of me. The men roared with laughter. The Postman pulled out a piece of bread from a leather bag and cut some cooked ham.

“Here. Have some of this,” he said. I stared at his knife and remembered the salamander he had carved for me. “Here, take this,” he had told me, “It will protect you from the swamp people.” Clever man: he had carved out fear in my heart and then had carved out a talisman to protect me from it. Clever and goodhearted. Or maybe just clever.
I have just turned forty. My dog, Rat, has long been gone. Now I have only a horse. Its sole purpose is to provide movement for a cripple. Many days have gone by since I discovered the secret about the Big Feed. I’ve come to accept that the lie my people need is still necessary, but it is disturbing to think that violence doesn’t have an end. Or does it? Experience tells me that violence produces greater violence. After all, my people created a monster capable of eating its own limbs. I am one of its guardians. I feed the beast. But no rifle for me, just a crutch. No shooting. I will carry letters at my own risk. I’m not like the Postman’s people. Never wanted to be like them. I decided that a long time ago. I do the job my way, no matter what they think or say. The Postman is still alive. He is old, but still lucid. A heavy drinker, like many of us. I try to avoid him, but now and then we cross paths in Karapá. I have caught him looking at his hands. Discreetly. They have spilled blood. Not mine. Never. I can’t carry a rifle and letters at the same time: too many weapons, I say to myself. A rifle will kill a man; language, if distorted, can destroy an entire nation. I don’t want to be the man in charge of language and fire. It’s a dangerous combination. Better get going now. I have some mail to deliver, it’s getting dark and I’m running out of wine.

“Only a few know,” the Postman said. “You’re not to tell anyone, do you hear me, boy?”

I nod. I can taste the knife’s metal in the ham.

“Good, now drink some wine.”

From that point on, drinking from the wineskin will only be a means to numb my guilt.

“No you’re one of us,” the Postman says. “You will learn the songs and you will learn the stew recipe.”

“You will also deliver mail,” says the hunchback with a throaty laugh.

The men are looking at me, waiting for an answer. The horses keep eating. I am only fifteen, but I can already sense the huge gap between these men and their horses. Horses would never be as twisted as men, I tell myself. Never. I have taught a dog how to become a dog. Men, on the contrary, teach themselves how to lose their humanity.

Gunshots are heard in the distance. The horses lift their heads, prick their ears, neigh frantically. The man with the missing fingers caresses their
foregrounds to calm them down. The Postman pulls a rifle from one of the
saddles, hands it to me.

"Have you ever shot one of these?" he says.

"No, sir."

"Here. I'll teach you."

I point to the sky and fire. My heart shakes inside my body like a sharp
rock in an empty tin bucket.