

El Limonar

By Cesar Lozano

I rip out a sheet of paper from the spiral of my math notebook. Manuel hands me a pencil. I trace a line along the margins and scribble “EL LIMONAR” on the edge. Manuel sits leg-crossed next to me. He watches me plot down the four houses, pool, and gate at the bottom of the paper. Labelling each of them as I go. On top of the paper, I leave empty space to show the back of the farm — that’s where *el Duende* lives.

Tonight, we’ll try to catch it. Or at least get rid of it.

El Duende is an entity the size of a toddler that wears a large pointy hat. It likes to play old guitars, climb up houses with stairs, braid horse manes, and steal things. Four weeks ago, some farmworkers saw it take a handsaw from the workshop after midnight.

We had experience in this kind of job. Last year, we expelled a spirit that lived by the pool door. It kept locking Manuel out every time he went for an evening swim. One night, we borrowed a rice doll from his sister and wedged the pool door with it. The next morning, the rice doll was gone, and the spirit didn’t lock him out again.

Since then, we’ve known the farm is haunted. But only in some areas. For example, the houses and the fruit fields were not, because his grandfather had them blessed by a priest. We thought about sharing this story with the class but agreed that most 4th graders were probably too dumb to understand, and we’d get in trouble. Only Adolfo and Danny knew about it. And after telling them about *el Duende*, they volunteered to help with the operation.

Now, we wait for their arrival in Manuel’s bedroom.

A fan on top of the closet blows away the heat that seeps through the open window. Outside, a windchime sways in the sultry weather. We sit on the cold floor tiles.

“We’ll keep this map with us,” I say, tapping the paper. “Do you know where the hideout is?”

“I have an idea,” Manuel says, grabbing the pencil from my hand. “There’s the end of the farm in the back,” he draws a circle on the map. “Where we buried Spots I, and Spots II. It’s crossing the creek, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

We went there once. There’s only a wood fence and a large forest. It’s beyond the last house, behind the workshop, past the duck pond, and across the creek.

“But I’m not sure where the cave is, so we’ll have to use the bird,” Manuel goes on. “We’ll have to take our chances and grab it before the spirit steals it.”

The bird is our bait. The plan is to place it near the creek and lure *el Duende* out of its hideout. Then, we’ll spray it with water. In case the situation escalates, Manuel will shoot it with his brother’s BB gun.

“Are your parents gonna get mad if the bird dies?” I ask.

“Yeah, probably.” Manuel stares at me. “Let’s try not to kill it.”

I nod.

We turn our heads towards the window. Outside, the farm dogs bark in unison. *Ring Ring*. There’s someone at the gate.

“It’s them!” Manuel jumps to a stand. “Let’s go let them in!”

Spots III, Ringo, and Pepe whoof next to us as we walk down the cobblestone path. Adolfo and Danny stand by the green iron gate. They carry school backpacks and rolled-up sleeping bags. Manuel jingles a set of keys and opens the gate. We go inside the house and fill in the details for tonight.

After one hour, we set out for the citrus trees.

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Beyond the last house, the fruit fields cover most of the back of the farm. There are papaya, banana, grapefruit, lime, and orange trees — but mostly pineapple plants — neatly planted in rows of five. By the entrance, there's a polka-dotted goat statue in mid-walk and a crooked, wooden cross next to it.

A light breeze runs through our campground, rustling the leaves above us. We set up our tents under the trees. Plump, yellow, and juicy fruit hide between the foliage. The sunset paints the grass with an orange glow.

“They won't let me make a fire,” Manuel says. “They say we can burn the trees. I guess we'll have to do without one.”

“Doesn't it get too dark out here?” Danny asks.

“Yeah, but it's good we brought our flashlights.”

Danny looks towards the workshop. I watch Spots III and Ringo sniff the trees around us. Pepe bites a rubber bone next to Manuel's tent.

“That's fine by me,” Adolfo says, reaching into his backpack. “I came prepared.” He takes out a large military pocketknife and slides it open. I watch him wave it around. The black blade glints with sunlight. Danny bites his lower lip. Manuel looks in awe.

“Nice,” Manuel says. “Where did you get it?”

Adolfo tells the story of the pocket-knife. Later, Danny brings out his Gameboy Advance. We talk Pokémon Ruby. We talk about the girls from our class. Manuel forgot the BB gun. “It's okay, we'll get it later,” I say. The sun hides behind a mountain. I think about my bed back home.

Nightfall grows around us. Spots III, Ringo, and Pepe become shadows. I slap a mosquito on my leg. It's time to get the bird from the patio in the main house.

“I’ll go with you, Manuel,” Danny says. I watch their flashlights disappear behind the workshop. I brought my Dad’s flashlight. It’s a long black stick that looks like a police baton.

Danny and Manuel return with the birdcage covered by a towel. We agree that we should minimize damage to the bird, so Manuel doesn’t get in trouble.

“What about the gun, did you find it?” I ask.

“No, I think my brother hid it.”

I nod. My stomach grumbles.

Adolfo throws me a chocolate protein bar and opens one for himself. My hands feel cold as I tear the wrapper.

“Is there an escape route for tonight?” Danny asks.

I look at Manuel. We didn’t think about one.

“Well…” Manuel says. “Let’s make the pool our meeting point,” he points his flashlight to the empty firepit.

“There’re two ways we can get there. One is the same way we came here, passing through the evil goat,” he says. “The other one is by the patio next to the pond, behind my aunt’s house.” He draws two parallel lines with the beam. “That one’s faster, but there’s a lot of weird bugs that sting behind there.”

“So, not the pond,” I say.

“Sure,” he nods.

I chew on my protein bar and watch a bug crawl on a silver leaf. I turn off my flashlight. The sky is so bright that I can see the last house in the distance. We look up.

“Shit,” Manuel says. “I didn’t know it was full moon today.”

“What happens on full moon?” Danny asks.

“It means *el Duende* can cross the creek into the blessed terrain,” I say. Danny sighs. “We should have checked Manuel.”

“What do we do, then?” Adolfo asks.

“Everything’s ready guys. We can’t back down now,” Manuel says. “But I think we should go earlier.”

“I agree,” I say, scratching my eyebrow.

“Well, why don’t we go now?” Adolfo proposes.

Danny shifts in his seat.

“Come *on*,” Adolfo goes on. “We have to catch the damn thing.” He grabs a stick from the ground, stands up, and opens the pocketknife in his hand.

“How about this — I’ll do a quick check around the campground. Then, I’ll let you guys know what I see, and we can go with the plan.”

“Sure,” Manuel says.

“Good luck,” I add.

Adolfo nods.

“Spots come here,” he says, beckoning the dog to go with him. Spots III wags his tail and dashes towards him. We watch them disappear behind the fruit trees.

Danny bites his lower lip and points his flashlight at the trees. Manuel scratches a mosquito bite on his arm.

“How’s the bird?” I ask Manuel.

He lifts the towel and peeks inside. "It's eating," he says.

I crawl next to him and peer inside the dark cage. The lime green lovebird is perched on a rod, picking seeds from the feeder. She stops, ruffles her feathers, and plucks them with her beak. Manuel drops the towel back over the cage. We hear steps.

Adolfo jogs towards the campground from the direction of the pond. Spots III wags his tail next to him. His ears point up.

"Chicos," Adolfo says. "I think I heard something by the duck pond."

"What?" I ask.

"It was like a kid's laugh."

My stomach growls. I scratch my eyebrow. Manuel looks towards the pond. Danny grips his flashlight.

"I'm not going," Danny mumbles.

"Are you sure that's what it was?" Manuel asks.

"Yes, I think so," Adolfo nods. "That's what it sounded like."

"This means it's come out of the hideout," I say.

"We should have checked for full moon!" Manuel says, slapping his knee. "At least it hasn't made it to this side of the farm yet."

"Manuel, can we sleep inside?" Danny asks. We look at him. My hands grow cold.

"Okay, here. How about we just go now and try to catch it," Manuel says, standing up. "It's only like 10 pm."

Danny sighs.

“Let’s go!” Adolfo says, tapping the stick against the ground.

I feel my back pit against the tent, but I can’t back out. They need me. I grab the flashlight that looks like a police baton and stand up.

“Come on Danny don’t be like this,” Adolfo goes on. Danny sits cross-legged on the ground. Adolfo promises him nothing bad will happen, we’re just playing a game. Danny slowly makes his way up. His right arm shakes as he stands up.

“You are in charge of the bird, Adolfo,” Manuel says holding the cage. Adolfo drops the stick and grabs the cage by the handle. The bird flutters as they exchange it.

I hear mosquitos buzz around us. We tread along the fruit fields, towards the back of the farm. Moonlight showers the grass with a silver shine and casts a dark veil under the citrus trees. A light breeze rustles their leaves. My t-shirt feels damp. Danny keeps his flashlight on. I hear the gentle waterfall of the creek ahead.

The narrow stream flows from the property next door onto the duck pond. It marks the line between the fruit fields and the undeveloped part of the farm. The workers have used it as a graveyard to bury family pets for generations — among them, Spots I and Spots II. As we arrive at the creek, their successors Spots III, Ringo, and Pepe circle around us and sniff the grass.

We stand at the edge of the water. Cicadas buzz. Crickets chirp. Adolfo crosses himself, Manuel sips water, and Danny shines his beam to the other side. A frog croaks.

We step on a large rock in the middle of the creek to cross it. Adolfo first, Manuel second, then me, and last Danny.

On the other side, mossy rocks line up the creek’s side. The earth feels uneven under my shoes. Two saplings grow on the small stretch of grass. It ends in a row of thick bushes, tall monkey puzzles, and spreading rain trees — the forest. We tread through the field. I look at Manuel.

“Where are the dogs buried? I don’t want to step on them.”

“More to the back, don’t worry,” he says.

“Guys where do I put this?” Adolfo says, holding up the birdcage.

“Here,” Manuel says. “In the middle.” He steps on a small rock and scans the night like a sentinel.

Adolfo props the cage on the ground and removes the towel. The bird is perched on the rod.

“No, no,” Manuel says, turning on his flashlight. “More to the right.” He points the beam near the rock he stands on.

Adolfo bends to grab the cage, but the bird flutters inside it. It hits the bars and chirps.

“Be careful with it, you idiot!” Manuel says.

“I haven’t even touched it!”

“Come on guys just put it somewhere,” I say. My back sweats from the heat. There’s no breeze on this side of the farm. I look behind me and catch a glimpse of Danny. He stands still with his eyes closed, shoulders raised and clutched flashlight. The beam points towards the grass. Almost done, I think.

The bird flutters inside of the cage again. But this time the chirps are loud and come one after the other. Adolfo crouches and tries to keep the cage steady. The dogs growl. They look towards the forest.

There’s something in the bushes.

As Adolfo and Manuel bicker, I look at the row of trees. Above, the moon lights up a lost kite tail tangled to a branch. Below it, the bushes rustle. But there’s no wind. There’s only a face, short legs, and a small arm waving at me.

I scream.

They see it.

“HOLY SHIT!”

“RUN!”

I turn my back and run. Water splashes on my feet. My socks get wet. Manuel and Adolfo overtake me. Danny trails behind.

I see the workshop in the distance. I think about the pond route. It’s faster. I think about the bugs.

Manuel and Adolfo jump over a half wall towards the patio next to the pond. I look back — I’m the only one left. Danny went around the other side. No time to think.

I clamber up the half wall. My heart is in my throat. I drop on the muddy earth and run along the narrow path. To my right, black and yellow bugs with legs like scissors cling onto a mossy brick wall.

I run along the wall and past the patio. I run as fast as I can.

Adolfo and Manuel stand by the pool with their hands on their knees. Their chests heave. I stop next to them and catch my breath.

“What. Was. That?!” Manuel gasps.

“Did you guys see it?” I ask.

“Yeah. I almost shit my pants,” Adolfo responds.

Danny trudges towards us from the side of the fruit fields, hugging the birdcage. He drops it to the ground, and the cage rolls to the side. The bird flutters to a sideways stand on one of the bars.

Adolfo grabs the cage and turns it upright on the floor.

“Thinking about it, it kind of looked like a cat,” I say.

“Yeah, it had those eyes,” Adolfo says.

“Are there any *tigrillos* around here, Manuel?”

Manuel sighs, then laughs. "I don't know. But I'll ask my grandpa," he says.

Adolfo lies down on the floor. Manuel sits by the edge of the pool. I join them and stretch my legs out wide. A ripple moves through the water.

"You were right. There were a lot of bugs behind the pond," I say. "I saw a giant yellow one."

"Yeah, we saw red ones right before too," Adolfo says.

In the back, Danny sits on the edge of a beach chair. He stands up.

"Manuel," he says. "I'm sleeping inside the house."

We look at him. Manuel scratches his jaw.

"I think I will too."