

## The Secret Lion

By Alberto Alvaro Rios

I was twelve and in junior high school and something happened that we didn't have a name for, but it was there nonetheless like a lion, and roaring, roaring that way the biggest things do. Everything changed. Just like that. Like the rug, the one that gets pulled--or better, like the tablecloth those magicians pull where the stuff on the table stays the same but the gasp! from the audience makes the staying-the-same part not matter. Like that.

What happened was there were teachers now, not just one teacher, teach-erz, and we felt personally abandoned somehow. When a person had all these teachers now, he didn't get taken care of the same way, even though six was more than one. Arithmetic went out the door when we walked in. And we saw girls now, but they weren't the same girls that we used to know because we couldn't talk to them anymore, not the same way we used to, certainly not to Sandy, even though she was my neighbor too. Not even to her. She just played the piano all the time. And there were words, oh there were words in junior high school, and we wanted to know what they were, and how a person did them--that's what school was supposed to be for. Only, in junior high school, school wasn't school, everything was backwardlike. If you went up to a teacher and said the word to try and find out what it meant you got in trouble for saying it. So we didn't. And we figured it must have been that way about other stuff, too, so we never said anything about anything--we weren't stupid.

But my friend Sergio and I, we solved junior high school. We would come home from school on the bus, put our books away, change shoes, and go across the street to the arroyo. It was the one place we were not supposed to go. So we did. That was, after all, what junior high had at least shown us. It was our river, though, our personal Mississippi, our friend from long back, and it was full of stories and all the branch forts we had built in it when we were still the Vikings of America, with our own symbol, which had been carved everywhere, even in the sand, which let the water take it. That was good, we had decided; whoever was at the end of the river would know about us.

At the very top of our growing lungs, what we would do down there was shout every dirty word that we could think of, in every combination we could come up with, and we would yell about girls, and all the things we wanted to do with them, as loud as we could--we didn't know what we wanted to do with them, just things--and we would yell about teachers and how we loved some of them, like Miss Crevelone, and how we wanted to dissect some of them, making signs of the cross, like priests, and we would yell this stuff over and over because it felt good, we couldn't explain why, it just felt good and for the first time in our lives there was nobody to tell us we couldn't. So we did.

One Thursday we were walking along shouting this way, and the railroad, the Southern Pacific, which ran above and along the far side of the arroyo, had dropped a grinding ball down there, which was, we found out later, a cannonball thing used in mining. A bunch of them were put in a big vat which turned around and crushed ore. One had been dropped, or thrown-- what do those caboose men do when they get bored--but it got down there regardless and as we were walking along yelling about one girl or another, a particular Claudia, we found it, one of those things, looked at it, picked it up, and got very very excited, and held it and passed it back and forth, and we were saying, "Guythisis, this is, geeGuythis...": we had this perception about nature then,

that nature is imperfect and that round things are perfect: we said, “GuyGod this is perfect, this is perfect, it’s round, round and heavy, it’s the best thing we’ve ever seen. What is it?” We didn’t know. We just knew it was great. We just, whatever, we played with it, held it some more.

And then we had to decide what to do with it. We knew, because of a lot of things, that if we were going to take this and show it to anybody, this discovery, this best thing, was going to be taken away from us. That’s the way it works with little kids, like all the polished quartz, the tons of it we had collected piece by piece over the years. Junior high kids too. If we took it home, my mother, we knew, was going to look at it and say, “Throw that dirty thing in the, get rid of it.” Simple like, like that. “But ma it’s the best thing I” “Get rid of it.” Simple.

So we didn’t. Take it home. Instead we came up with the answer. We dug a hole and we buried it. And we marked it secretly. Lots of secret signs. And we came back the next week to dig it up and, we didn’t know, pass it around some more or something, but we didn’t find it. We dug up the whole bank, and we never found it again. We tried.

Sergio and I talked about that ball or whatever it was when we couldn’t find it. All we used were small words, neat, good. Kid words. What we were really saying, but didn’t know the words, was how much that ball was like that place, the whole arroyo: couldn’t tell anybody about it, didn’t understand what it was, didn’t have a name for it. It just felt good. It was just perfect in the way it was that place, that whole going to that place, that whole junior high school lion. It was iron-heavy, it had no name, it felt good or not, we couldn’t take it home to show our mothers, and once we buried it, it was gone forever.

The ball was gone, like the first reasons we had come to the arroyo years earlier, like the first time we had seen the arroyo, it was gone like everything else that had been taken away. This was not our first lesson. We stopped going to the arroyo after not finding the thing, the same way that we had stopped going there years earlier and headed for the mountains. Nature seemed to keep pushing us around one way or another, teaching us the same thing every place we ended up. Nature’s gang was tough that way, teaching us stuff.

When we were young we moved away from town, me and my family. Sergio’s was already out there. Out in the wilds. Or at least the new place seemed like the wilds since everything looks bigger the smaller a man is. I was five, I guess, and we moved three mile north of Nogales, where we had lived, three miles north of the Mexican border. We looked across the highway in one direction and there was the arroyo; hills stood up in the other direction. Mountains, for a small man.

When the first summer came the very first place we went to was of course the one place we weren’t supposed to go, the arroyo. We went down there and found water running, summer rainwater mostly, and we went swimming. But every third or fourth or fifth day, the sewage treatment plant that was, we found out, upstream, would release whatever it was that it released, and we would never know exactly what that day was, and a person couldn’t tell right away by looking at the water, not every time, not so a person could get out in time. So, we went swimming that summer and some days we had a lot of fun. Some days we didn’t. We found a thousand ways to explain what happened on those other days, constructing elaborate stories about neighborhood dogs, and hadn’t she, my mother, miscalculated her step before, too? But she knew something

was up because we'd come running into the house those days, wanting to take a shower, even---if this can be imagined---in the middle of the day.

That was the first time we stopped going to the arroyo. It taught us to look the other way. We decided, as the second side of summer came, we wanted to go into the mountains. They were still mountains then. We came running in one summer Thursday morning, my friend Sergio and I, into my mother's kitchen, and said, well, what'zin, what'zin those hills over there---we used her word so she'd understand us---and she said nothingdon'tworryaboutit. So we went out, and we weren't dumb, we thought with our eyes to each other, ohhoshe'stryingtokeep somethingfromus. We knew adults.

We had read books, after all; we knew about bridges and castles and wildtreacherouseaging alligatormouth rivers. We wanted them. So we were going out to get them. We went back that morning into the kitchen and said, "We're going out there, we're going into the hills, we're going for three days, don't worry. She said, "All right."

"You know," I told Sergio, "if we're going to go away for three days, well we ought to at least pack a lunch."

But we were two young boys with no patience for what we thought at the time was mom-stuff: making sa-and-wiches. My mother didn't offer. So we got out our little kid knapsacks that my mother had sewn for us, and into them we put the jar of mustard. A loaf of bread. Knifeforksplates, bottles of Coke, a can opener. This was lunch for the two of us. And we were weighed down, humped over to be strong enough to carry this stuff. But we started walking, anyway, into the hills. We were going to eat berries and stuff otherwise. "Goodbye." My mom said that.

After the first hill we were dead. But we walked. My mother could still see us. And we kept walking. We walked until we got to where the sun is straight overhead, noon. That place. There that it doesn't matter; it's time to eat. The truth is we weren't anywhere close to that place. We just agreed that the sun was overhead and that it was time to eat, and by tilting our heads a little we could make that the truth.

"We really ought to start looking for a place to eat."

"Yeah, let's look for a place to eat." We went back and forth saying that for fifteen minutes, making it lunch time because that's what we always said back and forth before lunch times at home. "Yeah, I'm hungry all right." I nodded my head. "Yeah, I'm hungry all right too. I'm hungry." He nodded his head. I nodded my head back. After a good deal more nodding, we were ready, just as we came over a little hill.

And on the other side of this hill we found heaven.

It was just as we thought it would be.

Perfect. Heaven was green, like nothing else in Arizona. And it wasn't a cemetery or like that because we had seen cemeteries and they had gravestones and stuff and this didn't. This was perfect, had trees, lots of trees, had birds, like we had never seen before. It was like The Wizard of Oz, like when they got to Oz and everything was so green, so emerald, they had to wear those glasses, and we just ran like them, laughing, laughing that way we did at that moment, and we were running down to this clearing in it all, hitting each other that good way that we did.

We got down there, we were laughing, we kept hitting each other, we unpacked our stuff and we were acting "rich." We knew all about how to do that. Like blowing on our nails, then rubbing them on our chests for a shine.

We made our sandwiches, opened our Cokes, got out the rest of the stuff, the salt and pepper shakers. I found this particular hole and I put my Coke right into it, a perfect fit, and I called it my Coke-holder. I got down next to it on my back, because everyone knows that rich people eat lying down, and I got my sandwich in one hand and I put my other arm around the Coke in its holder. When I wanted a drink, I lifted my neck a little, put out my lips, and tipped my Coke a little with the crook of my elbow. Ah.

We were there, lying down, eating our sandwiches, laughing, throwing bread at each other and out for the birds. This was heaven. We were laughing and we couldn't believe it. My mother was keeping something from us, ah ha, but we had found her out. We even found water over at the side of the clearing to wash our plates with---we had brought plates. Sergio stared washing his plates when he was done, and I was being rich with my Coke, and this day in summer was right.

When suddenly these two men came, from around a corner of trees and the tallest grass we had ever seen. They had bags on their backs, leather bags, bags with sticks.

We didn't know what clubs were, but I learned later, like I learned about grinding balls. The two men yelled at us. Most specifically, one wanted me to take my Coke out of my Coke-holder so he could sink his golf ball into it.

Something got taken away from us tat moment. Heaven. We grew up a little bit, and couldn't go backward. We learned. No one had ever told us about golf. They had told us about heaven. And it went away. We got golf in exchange.

We went back to the arroyo for the rest of the summer, and tried to have fun the best that we could. We learned to be ready for finding the grinding ball. We loved it, and when we buried it we knew what would happen. The truth is, we didn't look so hard for it. We were two boys and twelve summers then, and not stupid. Things get taken away.

We buried it because it was perfect. We didn't tell my mother, but together it was all we talked about, til we forgot. It was the lion.