

Ito Romo

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Chicken Pot Pie

Will Ramirez looked in the rear-view mirror to the back seat, eyes focused, opened wide, and scolded the two of his three boys that were sitting in the back. “Eat the damn chicken pot pie, for Christ’s sake.”

They were complaining about the food. He’d gotten the pies for them at the truck stop at the exit to Artesia Wells. Zapped the pot pies in the micro. He seat-belted the kids back into their seats, two in the back, one in front with him—cold Mountain Dew between their knees, a warm pie in each lap, white plastic spoon stuck into each pie on top of the Mountain Dews—got back on the highway.

“But Dad, it looks like vomit,” Memo said from the back seat. That’s what had brought on the scolding.

The pies were cheap though, and Will Ramirez was determined to save money, especially on food since the kids would get a late supper at thier grandmother’s house in Laredo. His ex-wife’s mother. Gas was really expensive. He saved money wherever he could. Three kids and an ex-wife cost a lot. He never had any money left.

He loved them though, loved them in his own way, macho, hard. They were boys after all, not little sissies.

It was dark already. They still had about an hour to go. But the kids said they were hungry, so he stopped.

At the Truck Mart, Memo, the oldest, had said, “We want pizza. There’s a Pizza Hut across the street, Dad,” and pointed out the huge glass window.

“No, corndogs, Dad,” said Tony, the one in the middle.

“No, Dad, McDonald’s. We want a McDonald’s. McDonald’s. Dad, McDonald’s.” This was René, the little one.

“The pot pies are better for you. They have vegetables. I’m gonna get them, and you’re gonna eat them,” he said, “better than no damn hot dog.” And a hell of a lot cheaper than McDonald’s or Pizza Hut.

“Dad,” they all yelled together.

“Be quiet. Go wait in the car. Memo, take them to the car. Roll down the windows a little. I’ll be there in two minutes.”

When he stopped yelling at the kids in the back seat, he looked at René, who was sitting up front with him, to see how *he* was doing with *his* chicken pot pie. The kid’s eyes were teary. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked. The kid wasn’t eating. “Why are you messing with your food? Do I have to get mad at you, too? Eat the damn food, René.” He returned his gaze to the road, angry, biting his lower lip.

The little one threw up the four spoonfuls of chicken pot pie he had force-swallowed. They went right back into the pot pie. He turned to look at his father, maybe tell him what had just happened. But nothing came out. He just stared.

“Eat the damn chicken pot pie, René,” he yelled without turning, then, looking into the rearview mirror, “Eat it all now, all of you. Finish it all or I’ll turn right back

around and go back to San Antonio, no damn Christmas vacation for you. We'll go back home and take you back to your mama's house. You guys hear me? I'm tired. Worked hard all damn day long just to hand the damn check over to your mother. Now eat your food. You hear me?"

"Yes."

The radio got snowy. Will pushed in a cassette that was popped half-way out of the player.

René was terrified because he knew he had to finish the chicken pot pie. Or no Christmas. And he planned for Christmas at his grandmother's all year. She, his grandmother, set up a nativity scene every year in her living room with about five hundred miniature figurines in it, and she never said no to him when he asked if he could "put something on there, Wela" no matter how "stupid" it seemed to his older brothers. The very first Christmas that he could remember at his grandmother's he added a dinosaur he'd gotten in a box of cereal during the movie Jurassic Park. So for the last three years, he'd searched for months and months before Christmas for the perfect toy, the perfect trinket to add to her nativity. Last year he placed a giant plastic gold fish he'd traded from a kid in school after show and tell. It was made out of clear squishy plastic that made the fish look particularly real, except for its size, of course. The giant gold fish hadn't fit into the foil river his grandma had molded to simulate the water cascading from one level to another, so she went into the kitchen and brought out a big piece of heavy-duty foil and molded it into a kidney-shaped lake, placed it at the end of the river on the lowest tier, as if the river emptied there. In it, she placed René's plastic fish, and said, "See, m'ijito, it feets perfectly." The huge scene had grown from one small corner to

half the size of the living room in the fifty plus years his grandmother had been putting it up. This year, he'd begged his father to take him to McDonalds for his birthday lunch. Will, no matter what, made it a point to pick up all the boys for lunch whenever it was one of the kids' birthdays, even if it was during the week, on a school day. He'd get special permission to let them all out at the same time for lunch.

René didn't particularly like McDonald's, ketchup made him feel like throwing up, and Will refused to special order for any of his kids, "You should learn to eat your food like a man." But the food wasn't the reason he'd wanted to go there. It was the plastic Star Wars figurine he saw advertised on TV, free with every Kid's Meal, that he was after—the Jabba Da Hut. It was the only animal he could think of that she didn't have.

He swallowed slowly, spoon after spoon after spoon of thrown-up chicken pot pie until it was all gone. When he had finally finished and felt as if he'd throw up again, he reached under his thigh to touch Jabba Da Hut tucked away underneath his thigh. His stomach started to settle. Now he knew his dad would not turn around. Now he could go see his grandmother's nacimiento, and there, they'd decide together exactly where among the clay figurines they'd place Jabba. Perhaps among the shepherds and their sheep, or with the farmers and their burros, maybe with the women balancing trays of bread on their heads, or among the children carrying pails of water or small bundles of wheat on their backs towards the manger. This magic land of sparking lights and dried moss before him, this miniature universe of crushed paper grocery bags spray-painted to look like sand, darkened ceilings filled with a thousand silver stars dangling from invisible wire, tails of silver icicles which swung across the sky like comets every time someone

opened the living door. Here, sitting in front of that nativity scene, he realized what magic was.

After a while, Will looked again into the rearview mirror and asked, “You eat your food?”

“Yes,” they answered.

“No, you haven’t, Memo,” said Tony. “Dad, he’s lying.

“No, I’m not. Don’t believe him, Dad. I’m almost finished. Look,” he said.

“Don’t make me stop,” he said. “If I stop . . . I’m gonna . . . you’re all gonna get a beating.”

“Don’t stop, Dad, don’t stop. I’m almost finished. Look, last spoon,” he said as he shoved the last piece of crust and two tiny pieces of carrot and a pea into his mouth.

Will looked at René. He was crying. He felt like throwing up again.

“What’s a matter with you now?”

“Nothing,” he answered.

“Nothing? Then why are you crying, huh?”

“No reason.”

“Then stop crying. If you have nothing to cry about, then don’t cry, stop crying, dammit. You know what, I have three little girls, don’t I?”

The kids in the back started laughing.

“Muchachita,” said Memo. “René is a muchachita,”

“Yeah, mu-cha-chi-ta, mu-cha-chi-ta, mu-cha-chi-ta,” chanted Tony.

“I’m not a muchachita,” said René, turning, clicking open the seat belt to jump into the back seat, arms flailing, tears flying. “You’re a bitch. The both of you. That’s what you two are. A bitch.”

Will reached over instantly, slapped the kid on the mouth hard with the back of his hand. Saliva flew into the back seat. Some landed on Memo’s face. He didn’t even dare move to wipe it off.

René sat back in place. He was bleeding. Tender, tiny lip cut. He didn’t say a word, didn’t even cry. Just looked ahead over the dashboard to the stars in the sky, thought about his Wela, cried silently.

Will wrung the steering wheel’s rubber cover. He knew what he’d done. Lost control. Just lost control. Flipped on the cabin light. Saw the blood.

He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his handkerchief, and handed it to the kid. Turned the light off. Stared at the road in front of them.

A huge white-tail jumped out into the middle of the road and froze.

“Dad,” yelled one of the kids from the backseat.

“Watch it, Dad,” yelled the other.

They barreled right into it. The windshield exploded. Will’s eyes filled with shattered glass, then blood and coarse deer hair. He could see nothing, just a bright red glow—one of the headlights had twisted on impact onto the crushed sheet metal of the hood. It was still lit, still wired, shining into the car. As tightly as he held onto the steering wheel, he still couldn’t control the car. The two right wheels grabbed the edge of the road’s shoulder like a track. The car must have hit a stone or a break in the asphalt or something because, suddenly, the car flew off the shoulder into a shallow ditch that acted

like a ramp and made the car flip, then roll over twice before it landed back on its tires, smoking.

There was silence for a while. Then Will started to hear cars drive up, doors slam, talking.

One man jumped out of his truck and sparked two bright red flares in the right-hand lane about fifty feet from the huge mangled buck which someone was already pulling by a leg off the interstate. The deer's antlers left white trails as if a giant had scratched his nails against the asphalt like a blackboard.

Will reached over instinctively. The seat was empty. He brushed deer hair off his face, and blood. He wasn't sure if it was the deer's blood or his own. "Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god," he yelled.

He unfastened his seat belt, hurt, but still scooted over, patted the floorboard to see if the kid was there. Nothing.

"Oh my god. Oh my god. Oh my god," he said again.

He reached over the car seat to the back, almost jumped over, but felt a pain so severe in his stomach that he bent forward and threw up. He spat a few times and turned again, reached over the seat despite the pain. Touched Memo's legs, then Tony's.

Yelled at them, "You guys alright?"

There was no answer. "René, René, you back there, hijito?"

There was no answer. He pulled himself over the seat as much as he could. The pain made him black out for a minute. He forced himself back to. Pulled himself over. Felt around the floor, around Memo's legs, over the hump in the middle, under Tony's legs. Nothing.

He pulled himself back into his seat, reached at the windshield, knew what he was looking for, knew there'd be a hole. He could feel the unusually cool South Texas winter breeze before he made contact with the heated hood, then with what little glass was left along the edges, cut himself, blacked out again. Came back to almost immediately, his hands on the hot hood. The headlight still bright. He imagined the huge hole in the red glow.

Someone was at the car door. "You alright? Everybody all right?"

"Yes . . . no, my kids . . . they're in the back. Check on 'em please. The little one, René, I can't find him. Find him. Find him, please. I can't see. Please, help me find him." Will reached at the man's shirt and gripped it, then let go. "Help me, please, help me find the little one. Get the kids out of here, please. Get them some help. Do you have a phone? Call the cops . . . the ambulance. Please. Help the ones in the back, please."

The man at the door turned to listen to another person yelling something at him, Will's hand was printed onto his shirt, you could see it clearly in the bright headlight lighting up the whole bloody scene.

The man walked off toward the person yelling at him. Will thought he heard the word "child." He pulled himself up, closer to the door to hear better, couldn't hold it, folded over. He slowly, painfully moved his hand back to the passenger's side, started feeling around in vain, again. His fingers brushed the handkerchief. He grabbed for it, knew immediately what it was, still folded, thick, took it in his other hand, put it to his face, breathed deeply. His other hand, back to searching aimlessly, found Jabba Da Hut.