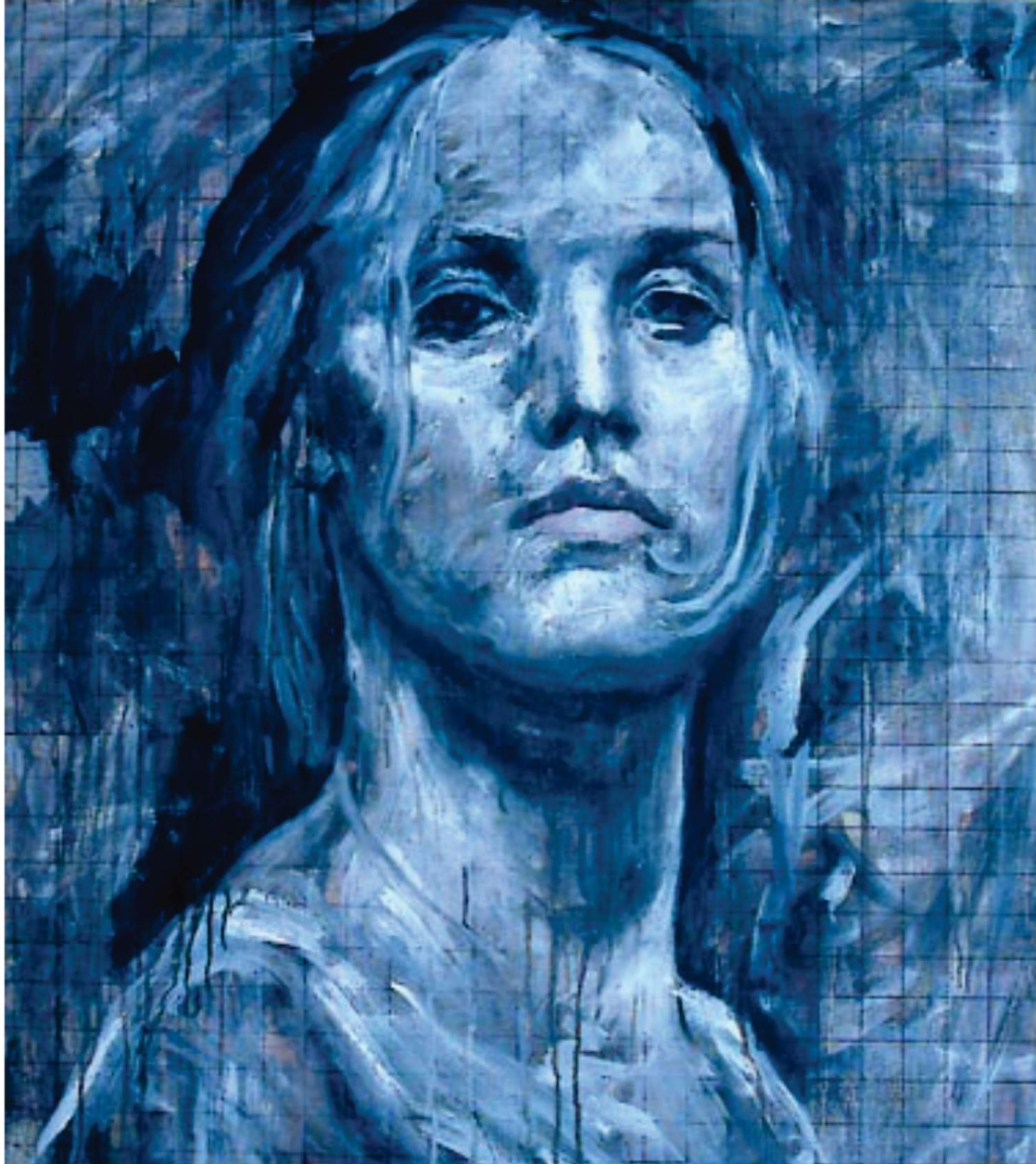


Anthony's Quest

Mariel Estevez



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Capítulo 1

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White, yellow, red –once again, the ritual had begun. Double squeezes for the green, blue, purple and black paint tubes. He softly grazed his collection of brushes with his hand, and made a thought-out choice. Painting in his studio the night before the opening day of his art exhibitions always soothed him.

Sitting on a tall, wooden stool, with his head slightly tilted, and the tip of his tongue sticking out, completely absorbed in his work, Anthony's sea-green eyes sparkled as he watched the blank canvas on an easel before him gradually come alive with every stroke. Some were delicate, others, vigorous, full of blended colors and contrasting textures. One next to the other, in an orderly fashion, emotions presented themselves in his palette, ranging from light to dark, from happiness to sadness, through hope, uncertainty, fear and deceit. His creativity flowed more easily at night, that being the time of day when he produced his best works of art.

No wife or kids waited for him at home, not even a needy dog or a lifeless-looking fish. However, he preferred to think of it as an opportunity for devoting his life to his art, rather than as a failure. On the worktable, a half-eaten carton of Chinese food and an empty bottle of beer disrupted his tidy workspace. Through the floor-to-ceiling window in his studio, the bright moon was his sole companion.

Family had always been a delicate issue for him. The Ciudad Juárez city orphanage, in Mexico, had been his home for almost a year, until a lovely American couple adopted him and took him to live in the United States, when he was almost five years old. Sadly, few were the memories of his life before the adoption. He recalled living somewhere in the US, having a father, who had not been around much, and a mother; they had never gotten along well. The sound of their constant spirited quarrels in Spanish still resounded in his ears. It did not matter that he could not understand Spanish, for the sound of anger and resentment transcended all languages. "Spanish is the language of the poor," he remembered his mother saying; she would not have her son speak other than English.

After his father came home from whatever one-day job he had found that day, he would usually pick a fight with his mother for no reason, so she would make Anthony hide in his room, bring out all his brightest pencils and blank sheets of paper, and draw colorful, soothing landscapes.

One night, carrying only an improvised, half-full suitcase, he and his father left home. "Vamos, Antonio, we leave America for good. I take you to abuela Carmen house, across the border. You like it better over there, mijo. This no place for you." His opinion would not matter to his father.

Illegally crossing the border into Mexico with the ill aid of two coyotes, he had parted from his father in a very confusing episode at a place where, as an adult, he thought that must have been the border between the United States and Mexico. Having no identification with him, the Immigration Police had wrongly assumed he was part of a group of Mexicans who was trying to get into the United States. The local Mexican orphanage gave him a bed for the night. However, night turned into day, and days turned into months, until life before the orphanage fell into oblivion. Without exactly knowing how or why, Anthony had found himself an orphan.

Long ago, he had decided to picture his mother in his mind, every day, as a brain exercise, so as not to allow himself to forget her. He remembered his mother's green eyes (a bit sad, though), a sweet, reassuring voice that she would reserve for him, and that every night she would tuck him in, sit by his bed and, while stroking his dark, curly hair, she would sing the sweetest lullaby in Spanish. He recalled the lyrics were about a cotton-white moon and bright shooting stars, but even though there was more to it, he could not bring himself to remember any more. However, he had managed to remember part of the lyrics by heart:

"Mil estrellas fugaces el inmenso cielo cruzarán. Ya puedes dormir tranquilo, porque ellas te cuidarán. La luna blanca, suave como algodón, acaricia tu rostro con esta canción..." The idea of bright shooting stars illuminating the dark sky, and a cotton-white moon watching over him comforted his grieving soul. Not even once again in his whole life had he heard this song, and that saddened him deeply.

Some nights he would find himself in his studio, painting about all the little things that reminded him of his mother and those long-lost happy times: the warm glow of her beautiful eyes, and the moon and stars from his lullaby.

All was ready for his exhibition the following afternoon at his gallery, the Moonlight Art Gallery, in the art district of New York City. He loved Manhattan, The Big Apple, "the city that never sleeps," where people always seem to be looking for something, never resting, always on a quest... just like him, who had been looking for his birth mother for as long as he could remember. Fantasies about running into her in a crowded street, and somehow knowing it was her whirled in his mind, painfully rutting his brain. It would be so comforting to embrace her and hold her

tight against his chest, and never let her go.

As he always did on opening days, he ambled through the different rooms of the gallery. Watching the visitors' reactions to his paintings, and listening to their comments seemed a very constructive experience. On approaching his mother's portrait, which was his favorite piece, he saw some kids looking at it and risking opinions. Not having had siblings or children of his own, he considered them extremely interesting creatures, so he thought it would be fun to listen to what they would have to say about his work.

"Yeah, you're right! How weird is that?" said a boy. Anthony felt intrigued. It was definitely worth stopping and listening to that conversation. "Come, Grandma, mira! The woman in this painting looks just like you, but ages ago!" joked a beautiful green-eyed girl. "And look, these could be the stars and the moon from that song you used to sing to us when we were little, remember?" said another boy in surprise. Spontaneously driven by cherished memories, the three began humming a soft melody – a warm sensation swept through every fiber of Anthony's being – a melody so familiar to him that it almost felt painful to hear.

Curious about what the children were talking about, an old woman trudged across the room towards them. "What are you saying, kids? Me in a painting?" she asked doubtfully, "that I have to see." When she saw the painting, her world stopped; her green eyes sparkled like a thousand emeralds and, opening them wide, she pressed her hands against her lips and let out a shriek. Anthony took a step forward and approached her, attracted by an irresistible force, unaware of the world surrounding him. Everything around him went deafeningly silent; everything disappeared from his sight, except for the small, undefined silhouette in front of him, which gradually made itself clear. The old woman looked into his eyes – two tempestuous deep, green seas suddenly collided against each other – and softly stroked his now greying curly hair.

"An... Antonio? Anthony? ¿E... Eres tú, mi amor?" she stuttered. Over forty years of uncertainty and doubts suddenly piled up in his chest, choking him. Long-overdue tears rolled down his cheeks as she began to sing his song, his precious lullaby:

"Mil estrellas fugaces el inmenso cielo cruzarán. Puedes dormir tranquilo, porque ellas te cuidarán. La luna blanca, suave como algodón, acaricia tu rostro con esta canción... Duerme bien, mi niño, tú puedes ser feliz... La luna y las estrellas siempre cuidarán de ti."

In her eyes, he was still the sweet little boy that had been snatched away from her that night, so many decades before. "I'm so glad the stars took good care of you all these years, mi amor," said his mother between sobs. And with the longest embrace there had ever been, Anthony's quest had

finally ended.