

# Y E A R S O F P O T E N T I A L

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Julio came through his front door and dropped a twenty-pound canvas sack of freshly roasted coffee beans on his floor. He exhaled and sat on his couch, letting his arms spread wide across it. He smiled.

In Guatemala, coffee beans were as common as cockroaches. To say drinking it was part of the culture would be to misunderstand Guatemalans, like they'd chosen it from several other options. In truth, coffee could be traded for rice almost pound for pound, that is, if one actually had to trade for it. Many already worked on a coffee farm or knew someone in their family that did. Some farmers did their own roasting to cut costs by cutting out the middleman. It was common knowledge to

connoisseurs that on-site roasting, done by farmers, tended away from higher quality. But large, American resale accounts, like Costco, or corporate customer accounts, like Coca-Cola and Boeing, who were always looking for more coffee to turn out in their office galleys, didn't know that. And if they did, who knows, maybe they'd buy more.

Though Julio was an auto mechanic in Guatemala City, he'd taken to coffee roasting a couple nights a week at his friend Juan's farm. This was his way of living out his young-man's dream of being a coffee roaster. He'd convinced Juan to let him come roast by telling him he'd fix his van for free for a year. Maybe, Julio thought, if my roasts are good enough I could even become a roaster for Juan full-time and leave my auto days behind!

Growing up, Julio always dreamed of becoming a roaster. But because his father was a melon and banana farmer, and because the demands of working in agriculture consistently meant working hard each day and never being finished, Julio was required to help out whenever he wasn't in school. As a young man, then, he'd come to terms with the fact that becoming a roaster might only ever be a dream and nothing more.

"Papi, is it all for us? Can I practice?" said Socorro who'd heard her father come home.

"Si, mija. Go get your brother to help you take this to the kitchen. Papi's tired. He needs a break." He'd carried the bag home on his shoulder two miles from Juan's farm. "Rodrigo, ven acá!" he yelled. "Where is your brother?" he said to Socorro.

She was trying without success to drag the bag away into the kitchen. She shrugged at her father.

“Well go find him. Tell him to help you.”

“Que es eso?” said Regina, his wife, walking into the family room where Julio was sprawled.

“Coffee, my dear,” he smiled. “Courtesy of me.”

“We still have three pounds of unopened coffee from the mercado in the cupboard.” She dried a dish in her hand, swabbing it in circles

“Yes, but *I* made this batch,” Julio said.

“Is that supposed to be convincing?”

“Oh come here,” he motioned for her to sit. “It’s just coffee. I didn’t pay anything for it. We’ll use it up. Just watch.”

“Well, you’re the one always saying coffee doesn’t last forever,” she said, sitting.

“Where’s Rodrigo?” he said.

“Oh you know,” she said, motioning with a nod toward Rodrigo’s bedroom. “By the way, the kid is single-handedly drinking us out of every orange juice carton we buy.”

“Ah,” Julio scoffed. “But why? I’ve explained that coffee is better for his mind. It gets the creative juices flowing. More and more real juice just makes you need to piss.”

“I’m just concerned. He spends all day in his room. How much drawing can someone do?”

Julio exhaled. Placing his palms on his knees, he boosted himself up. He felt heavy, tired, well beyond his years of potential. His was just a body getting slower, he knew that. The aches in his knees, his back, and the dreary hum seeming to buzz throughout his muscles more regularly after work reminded him that he should probably be relaxing more, imparting his wisdom, and readying to die happily.

“I’ll go in and check on him,” he said.

“But Papi says,” Socorro was saying into the crack where Rodrigo’s door met its threshold.

“Rodrigo,” Julio said with authority. His knuckles thumped his son’s door twice. He could hear shuffling, something like paper scrambling, and then the door swung open.

“What, what?”

“What, what?” Julio said back mockingly. “I’m your father. Is that how you address your father?”

“Sorry, Papi.” Rodrigo looked down and then back into his room. “I was working.” He gazed at his desk.

“Well, come out and help your sister. She can’t drag that bag by herself,” Julio said pointing into the family room.

Rodrigo looked beyond his father and saw the canvas sack on the family room floor. “Do I have to? I’m right in the middle—”

“Rodrigo,” Julio snapped.

Rodrigo let his shoulders drop and exhaled. He pulled his door shut as he walked out of his bedroom and started down the hallway. “Come on,” he said halfheartedly to Socorro.

Julio followed slowly and watched as Rodrigo knelt to Socorro’s level and instructed her where to grab on to the bag of beans. When Socorro could not lift her side, Rodrigo did not get upset. He didn’t sneer or treat her with the kind of indifference one might expect of an older sibling being distracted from his work. Instead, he calmly said, “that’s OK,” and hoisted the bag up by himself and let it land on his shoulder. As he walked it into the kitchen Julio saw how Socorro stood for a moment watching him, and then, hurried in after him.

A week passed and the family’s coffee supply was already half gone. Of course, Julio had suggested the family, including Socorro, drink coffee with every meal. But what really helped the twenty pounds of beans move was Julio’s insistence upon giving away a pound or two to every neighbor and co-worker who’d accept.

“I’m so happy to be finally roasting great coffee for Guatemala City,” he said with a smile as he came through the door one evening.

Regina was reading and glanced up. She held a finger within the pages. “I’m glad you are too, my dear.”

“It’s so much better than that mass-produced dirt variety we find at the mercado.”

Regina nodded. “Did you happen to bring home a check from the shop?”

Julio shook his head. He sat next to her.

“That’s two weeks you haven’t been paid now,” she said.

“They say the shop is slow, and it is. I know it’s slow. All the more reason for me to be working up a little side-business with the coffee.”

“We’ll just have to cut back a little.”

“Si, es cierto,” he sighed. “No more orange juice,” he smiled.

“Well that’ll be good. Rodrigo’s still helping to make sure of that anyway.”

“Still?” He said. He started to stand.

“Where are you going?”

“He needs this spelled out to him,” he said reluctantly. “Nobody in this family gets away with being a hog.”

Julio knocked once on Rodrigo’s door, turned the doorknob, and stepped into his room. “Working?” he said, still holding the knob.

“Si,” Rodrigo said, looking back from his desk.

Julio put his hands on his hips and walked into the center of the room and looked around. There were pictures and photographs everywhere, one’s he’d never noticed. They were of trees, canyons, colorful hillsides.

Julio suddenly feared something, and it made him keep a certain distance from the pictures his son had hung. While he wanted his boy to be inspired, he also knew that his hobby would inevitably dwindle. It would have to. Soon, Rodrigo would have to let his artistic ventures go in order to work, just like he had.

Having yet to see any of his son’s work, Julio was also unsure of Rodrigo’s talent. Chances were high Rodrigo had been wasting his time. After all, Julio didn’t know of any artists in he or his wife’s family. Until Julio left farming for automobile maintenance, farming was all they’d ever known. He knew that one day it would be

his job to explain, in a sort of tough-love, father-to-son way, that his boy didn't have the gift.

“Want to see my best painting, Papi?” Rodrigo said. “So far, I think it's my favorite too.” As Rodrigo shuffled through a stack of poorly organized canvases, Julio approached his son's desk and placed his hand upon it. It was the one he'd found years ago one night after work. He'd placed his hand upon it then the same way he was now. He remembered the joy he thought he'd feel in getting to repair and give it to his son to practice drawing on. After dragging it back to his auto yard, he attended to it for many nights, fixing its joints and legs and working tirelessly to sand and refinish its every inch. He was proud of the opportunities in his life that, when given the chance, he could prove to himself that no challenge was too difficult. He ran his hand across the finish and was happy to feel it was still smooth.

Atop it, beyond a scattering of pens, pencils, brushes and bottles of paint, stood six drinking glasses in a neat row. Three were empty, and three had varying amounts of orange juice still inside.

Julio quickly lifted his hand. He looked down at Rodrigo sternly. “So are you holding our glasses hostage?” he said. “You know we need these. Your mother has created myths about the glassware that has sprouted legs and walked off.”

“I know,” said Rodrigo, “but here, just look—”

“And another thing, why haven't you finished drinking the orange juice from half of these glasses? Why go back for a new glass when you've still got plenty left? This is expensive, Rodrigo. I don't fix cars all day so you can waste orange juice.”

“I know, Papi, I know. I'm sorry, but here if you look—”

“If you know,” Julio said louder, “then why are these still here, mounding up like piles of trash on your desk? It’s like a pig-pen of paper and dishware in here, Rodrigo.”

Rodrigo went quiet. He was holding a canvas. He gazed at the floor. “It’s not trash,” he said. “That’s not the point.”

“The point? Well then tell me, *hijo*, what is the point?”

“I like it,” Rodrigo looked at his father meekly. “I like to paint the things I see. That’s the point.”

“The things you see.”

“Si, Papi. Sometimes it’s things I discover at home.”

Julio stomped the bedroom floor. “The things you see? Trash in this room is all I see! Are you telling me you like painting trash? That all this time you spend here covering your canvasses with expensive paints and oils and whatever else is only to reproduce piles of trash?”

Rodrigo went quiet again.

“These people who take these pictures,” he pointed emphatically at the images on the wall, “they have gone out and have discovered things worth spending time capturing. They have done the research. They are true artists. You sitting here scribbling lines—”

Rodrigo suddenly flung the canvas from his hand. It spun through the air like a Frisbee and hit the wall. His fists were like two small stones; he walked briskly from his room, narrowly dodging Socorro who’d been watching from the hallway.

“Come back here,” Julio said aloud. From the middle of the bedroom he could hear the front door open and swing shut. The walls of his home gently rumbled.



He brought his palm to his forehead and sighed. He gazed up at the pictures on Rodrigo's walls again, studying them now more closely. Many were somber and vast images of landscapes, several with sunsets. He was impressed; the pictures were actually very captivating. Across all four walls were dozens upon dozens of photographs, sketches, and photocopies of paintings, obviously torn out of magazines or scanned and somehow printed. Yes, not only did he love to draw and paint—he also loved drawings and paintings.

“Mira, Papi, es jugo,” Socorro said from the hallway.

Julio could see her short arm pointing into the room and at the floor near the wall. One corner of the canvas was leaning against the wall, and being opposite her father, Socorro was able to see the side that Rodrigo had painted, while Julio could only see the blank, back side.

He walked over and picked it up. He ran his fingers along its back and felt the coarse paper. It was different than a canvas sack used for coffee. The painting canvas was stiffer, higher quality, more refined. As he held it, he contemplated whether he was ready to turn it over. On the other side would be the product of his son's time and concentration. Again he feared discovering that his boy was a poor artist, that he would need to break this fact to him, and that he'd need to come up with a way of explaining that art is usually just a hobby, and nothing more.

Julio thought then about how Rodrigo had selected this canvas in particular to show him. This meant he was proud of it. And wasn't pride what Julio wanted for his family? Even if Rodrigo wasn't amazing, Julio wondered why he'd taken it upon himself to feel so burdened by the responsibility of telling his son he wasn't good.

Slowly, Julio began to turn the canvas over. When he had, he was immediately stunned. The warmth in the orange, the sleek precision of the grays and whites. It was breath-taking. Rodrigo had painted this? This was no simple sketch. No experimental mixture of paints at all.

Upon the canvas were six neatly aligned glasses of orange juice, each glass containing a different amount. There was pulp residing along the insides of some, distinct rings at the rims of each glass like someone had been drinking from them, and the faintest inkling of fingerprints.

Yes, Julio thought, *my son has even managed to capture fingerprints!* His mind filled with questions; he imagined the greatness his son would attain. The life he'd live, the way he'd provide for his own family one day.

Julio sat on his son's bed and held the canvas out in front of him. He wanted a way to explain to him how beautiful he thought it was. He wanted to praise it, to honor his son. He looked up at the pictures on the walls once more, and then down at his hands.

"I'm sorry, mijo," he whispered to himself. "It is beautiful."