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**DEATH'S
COUNTRY**

PEACHTREE
Teen



Published by Peachtree Teen

An imprint of PEACHTREE PUBLISHING COMPANY INC.

1700 Chattahoochee Avenue

Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

PeachtreeBooks.com

Text © 2024 by R. M. Romero

Jacket illustration © 2024 by Carolina Rodriguez Fuenmayor

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Design and composition by Lily Steele

Printed and bound in March 2024 at Sheridan, Chelsea, MI, USA.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

ISBN: 978-1-68263-691-6

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

CANTO I
AS ABOVE

PROLOGUE

The most important lesson I've learned

since I turned sixteen:

Love can't be contained
in a word, a kiss, a single heart.

Love's a pandemonium of parakeets,
free and bright.

Love isn't a single beat; it's a serenade,
one line rolling into the next.

Love can be stretched like toffee
across bodies and lips.

Love won't shatter when it's held
in more than one hand.

Love doesn't need to be divided
between only two people.

There's enough of it
to go around.

DEATH'S COUNTRY

So I'm not afraid of letting love in.
I'm afraid of letting it drag me down,
 down,
down,
back into
the underground.
Which is exactly where love
is trying to take me tonight.
(If I have the courage
to follow it.)

CHAPTER ONE

Every hospital reeks of distilled sadness;
Mount Sinai in Miami Beach
is no different.

As me and my girlfriend Renee
escaped its halls,
I gulped in the night air, clearing the dead-dream rot
from my lungs.

Renee's hand was wrapped
tightly in mine, a gift I didn't want to surrender.
My other hand was
(strangely)
empty.

But that emptiness was the reason
we stood
under the Cheshire cat grin of the moon,
carrying
the burning afterimage of our girlfriend
in her hospital-room-turned-tomb
as 2 AM
bled into 3.
We were a fractured pair
when we were meant to be
a trio.

And it was all because of the foolish bargain
I'd made
while living in a city divided
by two rivers—
one of which had tried to swallow me
whole.

CHAPTER TWO

I can't remember why I fractured Eduardo's jaw
in the courtyard of Escola Maria Imaculada.
(Home of the best education
money could buy
in twenty-first century Brazil.)

Did Eduardo stare at me
for a breath too long?
Did his shadow cross mine
when I was enjoying my solitude?

Whatever the reason for my fury,
I only remember
the firecracker burst of my fist
as it connected with Eduardo's face,
the thunderclap of his skull
as it struck the marble walkway.

Every fairy tale ends with a prince.

The princess's adventure in the wild woods
is finished by his wedding ring.
The dragon's life among its hard-won treasure
is cut short at the tip of his sword.
The old king's golden reign
fades to history
thanks to his bravery and youth.

So when I say I was a prince,
I don't mean I was a hero.

I mean
I took what I wanted from others
before they could take it from *me*.

After the principal hauled me

off Eduardo, across the courtyard, into his office,
I smoothed my hair into an oil slick,
straightened my collar,
replaced my snarl with a grin,
café-com-leite sweet.

I've had enough of you,
Santos! the principal bellowed,
as loud as my fists had been.
No more forgiveness!
No more second chances!
This time, you're out of my school—
for good!

He reached for the phone
 (a threat to my future
 lying in wait)
on his desk.

Another boy
might have thrown himself at the man's feet,
kissed his ring, begged for a third chance.
But I was too good at pretending
 blood wasn't drying to my knuckles
 and shame wasn't burning in my belly
to sink so low.

I reminded the principal,
*My parents won't be happy
if you do.
They might even sue.
Not the school, but you . . .
personally.
And really, how much do you make
as a school principal?*

The specter of a lawsuit
stole the furious color
from the principal's cheeks.
He crumbed, his power fading
as his hand retreated
farther and farther from the phone.

You're suspended
for two days, the principal wheezed out.
And I'll have to call your parents
at the very least.

I shrugged
to show
what I thought of *that*.

(Princes could endure temporary banishment.)

Mami arrived to collect me less than an hour later
in her queenly regalia:
heels reaching halfway to Heaven,
her face schooled to severe perfection
thanks to years of practice
in front of the camera.

We left the school grounds
 (every wall and gate
 carved from white marble
 to hold back the December heat)
chased by a pack of whispers.

Andres Santos.
 Oh, him.

*His handsome papi is Brazilian.
Senhor Santos might be the boto cor de rosa,
the enchanter
who crawls out of the river
and undoes women with his charms.*

*He must have given up
being a folktale then.
Because now he sells castles and mansions
to men whose money
makes them kings.*

*Look, that's his Cuban mami!
She used to be the queen of telenovelas,
the beautiful, burning heart
of every beloved story.*

*Now she's made of
too much makeup, too many teardrops.*

*Andres Santos can make any girl
kiss him.*

*He can break any boy
(like poor Eduardo!)
with his fists.*

*He can dance storms
to life.*

*He draws poison in
and out of wounds.*

But my heart
was too riddled with bullet holes
to care
about the bite of any classmate's words.

Mami held off wailing like a mourner

until we were safely in her car.

Next time,

you'll surely be expelled! she cried,

weeping

a third river to join São Paulo's other two.

You're too much

like your father!

He bites

his way through the world,

kisses women

like he wants to break them.

If you're not careful,

you're going to end up

just

like

him!

A signal flare of anger
crackled
in my chest.
What Mami had said about my father
was (mostly) true—
but I didn't want to be a foot soldier
in their war, forced to take a side
when neither of them
was ever on mine.

I couldn't let Mami
hear my bitterness, so I let a lullaby lilt
creep into the reassurances
I offered her.

*Papi's not so bad, I said.
And don't worry about me.
I was angry at a classmate.
But I promise,
it won't happen again.*

Mami dabbed at her radiant tears.
Some were prepackaged; others might have been real.
It was hard to tell.
*You and your father never keep
your promises!*

Mami— I began.

But she had already crushed my face
in her hands.

(She was always trying to crush me
into some boy, some shape, some soul
I couldn't be.)

I was somebody

(somebody happy!)

before I married your father! Mami told me.

Remember that.

Keep your promises, and don't let love

eat you up

like it's eaten me.

Papi shimmied home too late that night.

Dinner had gone cold; Mami's fury hadn't.

It was red as the dawn

sailors fear.

She followed Papi through our house,

(the rooms sleek, hollow, empty)

her hands conducting

her anger.

You can't even bother

to be here for your son!

You're too busy

with your money, your girlfriends, yourself!

Papi rolled his eyes
like he rolled his hips
when he danced.
*Why should I
come home from work early
because Andres got in a fight?* he asked.
Boys fight!
*And it shows Andres will grow up
to be a strong man.*
Papi tipped his hat
 (and a wink)
my way.
*That is,
if you won.*

I always won.
But one look from my Mami
silenced my would-be boast.

Go, she said.
 To your room, Papi finished.

I slunk away, half grateful
they were still together enough to issue
joint commands.

Like many fifteen-year-olds, I breathed and bled
music.

Cut me open and you'd find
David Bowie, Billie Eilish, Arcade Fire
scratched on my eyelids and arteries.

With my parents busy
firing insults and past grievances
at each other,

*(You playboy!
I know why
you're really home
so late!*

*I was working—unlike you,
you useless leech, you has-been!*

I retreated to bed, snapped my headphones on,
and sank
into the music,
like I'd sink
into a river or a sea.

Jimi Hendrix

("All Along the Watchtower," 1968)

begged for a way
out of here.

And so did I.

I prayed

to whatever god would have me:

Let me be

a whisper of music, the calm inside the storm.

Let me be someone better.

But that night, no spirits

heard my pleas, and I stayed a snarl

of thorns playacting

at being a boy.

During my suspension,

Papi took me to his office—a reward and a punishment
fused into a single outing.

I was the jaguar for him,

lean and well muscled.

I strutted past his colleagues,

the first two buttons of my collar

thrown open in welcome,

my gold chain winking

flirtatiously at the secretaries.

Papi slapped me on the back, congratulating *himself*
on the boy he'd decided I was.

He told his business partners,

his not-so-secret girlfriend,

other men on the street:

*This is my son, Andres.
He's everything, isn't he?
Smart, fierce,
good at sports, good with girls.
He'll inherit
my business, my legacy
when I'm gone.*

But behind my smiles, I plotted
my tomorrows,
my flight from the inheritance
Papi wanted to pour into my hands.

In the end, my escape attempt
was more effective
than I ever could have hoped.