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## Late Bloomer

*Rich or poor, strong or weak, who among us has not begged God for a second chance?*  
Joseph Conrad

When life became intolerable in their wretched homeland, René Eric Betancourt ("Renny") and his elderly parents boarded a fishing vessel seeking passage to a more welcoming land across the sea. The trip on the shark-infested waters was perilous. The escapees (two dozen, besides Renny) undertook it only as a last resort, finding death in the deep preferable to the hellhole they were seeking to leave behind.

The distance was relatively short, but the boat encountered high winds and turbulent waves and almost capsized. By the time they reached foreign soil, three of the passengers had perished and the rest were in need of medical attention. The group arrived at night to a deserted spot on the coast, and its members dispersed stealthily. Renny's mother had a sister who owned a modest home and put them up for a few days, which turned into weeks. Finally, they were able to move into a boardinghouse and later to a dilapidated apartment in the ghetto.

Renny and his parents managed to survive the ordeal of their crossing, but their recuperation was slow. Renny's mother never got over the stress of the trip, and his father was debilitated and could not take the types of jobs involving physical labor that were available to illegal immigrants. Renny, a high school graduate, had hoped to enroll in a university to pursue a liberal arts degree but ended up having to become a dishwasher in a restaurant to support himself and his parents. He resented the roadblock their circumstances imposed on his future but had no choice: they were in constant fear of being apprehended by the immigration police, taken to a detention camp, and sent back to their country of origin.

Weeks became months, and before they knew it, they had been abroad for three years. Renny had

Weeks became months, and before they knew it, they had been abroad for three years. Renny had managed to learn the language of the nation they now called home. Some of the friends he made, mostly immigrants like himself, dubbed him "Renny, el descamisado," ("Shirtless Renny") from his appearance upon arrival in the country, a nickname that implied a lower-class status. Others referred to him as "el negro," for he was swarthy. Renny ignored the abuse from his peers since he felt he was smarter than most immigrants, and the gibes came out of envy.

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Renny's outlook changed for the better four years after his arrival. The restaurant where he worked was open well past midnight and the high turnover position of cashier for the night shift suddenly became vacant. The manager summoned Renny to his office and made a startling offer: Would he be interested in becoming the evening cashier, a job with higher pay and more exposure to the public? "I've been observing how dependable you are and am willing to take a chance on putting you in front of customers. Don't let me down." Renny nodded in assent and accepted the new job without hesitation.

As a cashier, he had relatively little to do. After midnight, the restaurant was virtually deserted and the biggest risk of the new position was falling asleep while sitting in front of the register. To keep himself occupied, he began doodling on discarded pieces of paper; the doodles became caricatures or portraits of the restaurant patrons. He had to be careful not to be discovered by his models, for one of them could object to being portrayed, take his complaint to the manager, and get him fired.

One of the late-night patrons was a young woman wearing a blue nurses' aide outfit. She worked at a hospital a block from the restaurant and came after eleven, taking a half-hour break to eat something and have a cup or two of coffee. She was clearly an immigrant like Renny, and although very pretty, she always appeared exhausted. She would sit at one of the tables closest to the entrance, as if the back of the room was beyond her strength. She would eat distractedly and sometimes leave half a sandwich uneaten.

For some reason, Renny started drawing a series of sketches of the girl. At first, his efforts were clumsy, but with practice, his lines became more precise, the delicate curve of her face defined itself into a more perfect oval, the black mass of her hair streamed dramatically from under her cap. As her features became better defined on the paper, she seemed to become more fetching.

They never exchanged more than a few words while she opened her purse and dropped a few bills on the counter for her meal. He often had the urge to pay her some witty compliment, a harmless catcall that would break the ice between them, but she looked so spent that he could not muster the courage.

That night, as she neared the counter to pay for her meal, the telephone rang. Renny picked it up and attempted to place the caller on hold, but the person on the line was insistent about placing a takeout order, and he could not get a word in edgewise. As Renny was struggling with the caller, he and the girl simultaneously fixed their eyes on the sketch he was working on, which he had failed to hide. He abruptly hung up, feeling his face grow warm with embarrassment, and turned the sheet of paper over.

"Why were you drawing me?" asked the girl accusingly. For once, he was forced to overcome his shyness: "You are so pretty, and always look so sad..."

"You should have asked permission before doing these drawings," she complained.

"I'm sorry," he began. Her face, however, broke into an impish smile. "Those are very good. Do you really think I'm pretty?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," he answered with mock earnestness. He was pleased that she

liked his work, and more so that she seemed receptive to starting a relationship with him.

"You are wrong, but I forgive you." She continued to smile coquettishly as she opened her purse.

"I'm Renny," he declared.

"Mariana," she countered.

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Their courtship was brief but passionate. Mariana had come from Paraguay in response to a worldwide search for experienced nursing personnel to alleviate domestic shortages. She was single and, having left her family in Asunción, had little in the way of expenses. She rented a small efficiency apartment close to work, did not own a car, and otherwise lived spartanly.

What Renny had taken for fatigue was mostly boredom. Mariana was tired of her monotonous existence and was saving money in the hope of moving to a more interesting destination, Paris or Rome, or Barcelona. Renny rescued her from emptiness, and the two soon became inseparable.

Their wedding was a small, intimate affair. A few friends and relatives gathered to celebrate the merging of the couple's individual aspirations into a joint wish for success. They were strangers in a strange land, determined to face the future together.

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Being married to Mariana had great benefits for Renny. Apart from the obvious – affection, companionship, frequent sex – Mariana had entered the country as a lawful immigrant, and this allowed Renny to apply for conditional resident status, which two years later entitled him to become a legal resident and removed the threat of deportation. Just as important, he could now apply to colleges and universities that required lawful immigrant status as a precondition to admission. This opportunity seemed an empty victory because Renny could not afford the tuition and lacked the free time to attend school.

The couple had regular conversations about finding a way for Renny to go to college. In the end, Mariana proposed that she assume the household's burden. Renny would find part-time employment and attend school while Mariana, drawing on her savings and her hospital job, would be the breadwinner in the family.

Renny was not averse to leaning on his wife for support but felt obliged to set one condition. He would go to a two-year academic institution and get a quick degree that would enable him to start making money fast.

After a search of potential careers, Renny opted for what appeared to be the most promising alternative: paralegal. He had no interest in legal matters but figured he had a keen mind and should be able to handle working in a law office. A local university offered a two-year paralegal training program, and Renny applied and got admitted. Mariana had to dig deep into her savings to pay for the tuition and fees, and Renny took a night job as a storeroom clerk for a furniture store. They managed to soldier on and two years later, Renny received his certificate and got a starting position as a legal assistant at a firm downtown.

Years passed. Renny became recognized for his ability to assist the firm's lawyers with research and other tasks. But, he did not relish his accomplishments, for he felt he had become stymied by another dead-end job. His dissatisfaction was compounded by the growing distance between him and his unexceptional wife. Mariana had proved sweet and supportive but boring, and her inability to conceive a child had left them resentful of each other. Thus, as the tenth year of their marriage came to a close, Renny acknowledged that Mariana had served an important role in his life, but it

was time for him to move on. They separated by mutual consent.

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As one of the firm's most experienced paralegals, Renny was assigned to work with one of the partners on an important case. The client, Rebecca Maier, was the widow of a business tycoon and the largest beneficiary in a will signed by her husband a few days before his death. The will was being contested by the deceased's children from an earlier marriage, who claimed the document had been the result of undue influence from his recently acquired "trophy wife" on her incapacitated husband. Scandalous allegations were hurled at Mrs. Maier, and tense depositions were conducted.

Renny became acquainted with the widow during discovery and the preparation for an upcoming trial. Both were the same age, early forties, and appeared to have compatible personalities. Mrs. Maier made a number of complimentary remarks about Renny to the lawyers handling the case.

Trial was averted when testimony by the plaintiffs' medical expert witness cast serious doubt on the competence of Mr. Maier at the time the will was executed. Mrs. Maier's lawyers recommended an out-of-court settlement and the widow accepted a seven-figure offer from the family instead of chancing a trial for the entirety of the estate.

The case went away, but the relationship between Renny and Rebecca continued. She was distraught by the rapacity of her late husband's family and was receptive to Renny's efforts to console her. One thing led to another, and they were married a few days short of her forty-fifth birthday.

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Renny found himself again getting support from a woman. Rebecca was wealthier than Mariana had been but was just as willing to help advance her husband's professional development. Before marrying her former husband, Rebecca had been the owner of a small cosmetics import shop. Now, with the proceeds from the settlement, she expanded the business and put Renny in charge of the company's day-to-day operations.

Renny successfully transitioned into a management position and ran the enterprise adroitly for the next twenty-five years. It became one of the most successful family-owned companies in the country. He did not derive satisfaction from his work but devoted all his energy to his wife's business affairs. At a personal level, he and Rebecca developed a cordial, though distant, marital relationship. He cheated on her a few times and suspected she did likewise. Theirs became a live and let live arrangement in which familiarity replaced affection. They were accustomed to each other, like a comfortable pair of slippers that one wore without paying much attention to them.

Then tragedy struck. Rebecca developed tremors in her hands and stiffness in her movements. Her speech was slurred. Her posture became stooped, she had difficulty balancing, and she fell more than once.

She was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and tried a variety of treatments and medications, which proved ineffective, for her symptoms worsened and her condition deteriorated. Her memory and thinking processes became impaired. She experienced anxiety and depression, insomnia, and speech and swallowing problems. She could no longer stand on her own and had to be moved around in a wheelchair.

Three years after she was diagnosed as suffering from Parkinson's disease Rebecca contracted pneumonia when food, stomach acid, and saliva entered her lungs. She was dead soon thereafter.

Renny was as supportive as he could be throughout the progress of the disease, but weariness

slowly took hold of his spirit, and, in his heart of hearts, he was relieved when the complications from Parkinson's took her life.

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There he was again. A second spouse had served her purpose, leaving him better off than he could have been on his own. Yet, Renny was seized by an almost incurable melancholy after Rebecca's funeral, What had he accomplished? He had wasted his life on meaningless pursuits, never fully carrying his weight but leaning on the charity of others. From dishwasher to paralegal to business manager, the trajectory of his life had been one of financial progress but no personal distinction.

He decided to give up the fight. He did not need to live in the mansion that Rebecca had built for them. He would move to a small apartment and hire a housekeeper to take care of his day-to-day needs. He intended to spend his final years traveling and enjoying life. He sold or gave away all he could and consigned to the trash bin whatever was left.

He was sorting through the personal items he would take with him into his retirement when, in an expanding file folder where he had kept papers dating back to his arrival in the country, he came across four pencil sketches of a lovely girl, executed with varying degrees of precision. They were the drawings of Mariana he had made surreptitiously when he worked as a cashier in that restaurant a lifetime before.

Finding the sketches brought tears to his eyes. He remembered the good, more innocent days of his youth and the emergence of his love for Mariana. And then he also recalled the burst of pride he felt when she praised his drawings. He looked at the sketches again, applying critically the many years of living that had transpired since their creation. They really weren't that bad.

Maybe there was still time for his life to prove meaningful.

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Renny would never go back to school to get that art degree that had eluded him in his youth. Instead, he set up a studio in his apartment and hired a retired art professor to coach him to develop painting skills and select suitable media. They settled on acrylic painting, which offered great flexibility and allowed adding textures and depth by applying layers of acrylic paint to the canvas. Acrylic also yielded quick results, a feature that was important to Renny given that he was reaching his mid-sixties and was in a hurry to make a name for himself.

Inspired by the work of painters such as Warhol and Hockney, Renny began to paint feverishly, and by the end of one year, had produced several acrylic pieces that were deemed acceptable by his coach. He then started the most arduous part of an artist's job: trying to sell his work.

Competition for venues to show artwork was fierce, and the only opportunity available to a beginner was to approach galleries and persuade the curators to consider exhibiting his paintings. Renny established a website where he described his approach and posted images of his output. He went to galleries and, approaching the curators, pointed to pieces on display that would complement by his work. He attended as many openings as he could, using the affairs as opportunities to approach artists, curators, and spectators to make acquaintances and discuss his art. He set up an online gallery and joined an artist collective.

Early in his marketing campaign, one of his pieces, a portrait of a woman sitting on a chair on a balcony gazing wistfully at a faraway sea, was accepted by a gallery and sold within weeks. After the hefty gallery commission, Renny's compensation was meager, but this did not matter much to him. It was not the material reward but the recognition of his worth as an artist and a human being that he cared about.

After the initial breakthrough, sales trickled in, and he built a reasonable reputation for himself. He continued to paint and, at the same time, redoubled his marketing efforts, contacting gallery owners, art critics, and everyone he knew, making feverish pitches that sometimes translated into sales.

He started to drink heavily as stress mounted with the efforts, which were not always successful, to further build his reputation. Then came the fatal stroke that brought his artistic career, and his life, to an abrupt end.

At his funeral, Renny's coach delivered a eulogy that glossed over the rough patches in Renny's life and concentrated on his manifold personal accomplishments. Placed on an easel next to the casket was his last completed work— a semi-abstract painting of a vase of pink dahlias, white roses, and mauve mums near a window overlooking a country garden. The coach ended the oration with these words, uttered while pointing at the painting:

"Like these flowers, Renny was a late bloomer, and his life's accomplishments as a struggling immigrant may perhaps be best appreciated in retrospect. I predict that posterity will be kind to his work and his memory will forever be revered."

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