

Chapter Two

The Boy heard him grab the iron railing and stumble up the stairs.

“Keep your breathing steady,” the Boy willed himself.

“Maybe he’ll leave you alone,” he thought without much hope.

His bedroom door opened and the stench of cheap *Priorato* filled his nostrils.

“Get up,” his father ordered. *“I know you’re not asleep.”*

The Boy scrambled down from the top bunk, quickly headed toward the door, in hopes of sparing his little brother huddled below.

No such luck.

“Both of you,” came the command. *“Downstairs.”*

The Boy and his brother took their position on the marble tile in the living room, the Boy closest to his father’s chair to act as a buffer. They stood at attention in their underwear, waiting. A half empty carafe of local plonk squatted on the coffee table next the tumbler that his father used as a wine glass. The Boy knew it had been filled more than once.

“Where was your mother this morning?” he demanded.

“At the market, I think,” the Boy answered.

“You think?” his father continued. *“But you don’t know.”*

“No, sir.” The Boy knew to keep his answers short.

“No, sir’, you don’t know or ‘no, sir’ you don’t think?”

“No, sir, I don’t know, sir.”

The man curled a fat hand around the glass’ rim and held it in his lap.

“Why do you ‘think’? How do you know she got out of bed?” The charade went on.

“We had fresh vegetables at lunch,” the Boy responded.

“Sir,” he added quickly.

“Where were you this afternoon?” He picked up his wine, pursed his lips and drained the glass.

THE GREAT ONES

{ A Business Fable }

*The Transformative Power
of a Mentor*

"I went to get her medicine at the 'farmacia'."

The Boy's back began to cramp.

"Straight there and back?" The interrogation dragged.

"Yes, sir."

"And you never saw her walk by?"

"No, sir."

The Boy made no expression, gave nothing away. He simply stood, in his boxer shorts, with his arms at his sides.

"Do you think I'm as stupid as you?" The father reached for the carafe.

"No, sir," the Boy said softly.

"What's that?" the father grunted. *"I'm not sure I heard you."*

"No, sir," the Boy repeated a little louder.

"No, sir' I'm not that stupid, or 'no, sir' I'm not as stupid as you."

The father pressed. The Boy held back. To engage him too early would only make it worse.

"No, sir," the Boy said again.

"That's it?" the father uttered, more fact than question.

"Yes, sir." The Boy knew the futility of trying to reason. He knew when to wait and when to provoke. He knew the beating would come shortly and didn't care. The words left far deeper scars.

"You better not lie to me, boy," the father barked.

"No, sir," the Boy parroted.

"Didn't you play 'futbol' in the square?" The father's voice began to get agitated.

"No, sir," the Boy repeated, aware that the end drew near.

"You know you did not come straight back, and you're just not telling me. She said you could, despite what I told you, and you're protecting her like you always do."

The Boy watched the control slip, almost immune. Any moment now...

"So that's it—you're not going to tell me."

"No, sir," the Boy mumbled.

THE GREAT ONES

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“Go get the belt,” the father ordered. “And you better make it quick.”

The Boy ran to his father’s room, passed his mother hooked to her oxygen bottle, opened the top dresser drawer and pulled out the brown leather belt, smooth on one side, rough on the other. He ran back and dropped it on the table next to the carafe.

He stood in defiance, the hatred flashing through his eyes.

“Turn around,” his father commanded.

The Boy failed to move.

His father pushed himself up from his chair, took the belt in his left fist and slapped it into the palm of his right.

“Turn around,” he said again, “or you’ll get it across your face.”

The Boy slowly, purposefully, tauntingly turned and put his hands on the staircase. He spread his legs, braced himself and mentally shut down.

He cried out when the first lash cut his skin—not because it hurt, but because he knew that unless he screamed the beating would go on until he did. Each time the belt bit into his back he yelped. His little brother started to whimper.

“You shut up,” the father yelled, “unless you want me to give you something to really cry about.” He waved the belt in the air.

The Boy sniffled anyway, ignoring the command, part of the game. If he stopped too soon, the beating would go on, even though he felt little pain. Eventually, the father tired, flopped into his throne and drank more wine.

“Go to bed,” he said. “Both of you.”

The Boy and his brother scurried out of the room and up the stairs. When he closed the bedroom door, the Boy put his arm around his younger brother’s shoulders.

“Don’t worry,” he urged, though the fearful sorrow in his brother’s eyes spoke volumes. “It didn’t hurt. I only pretended

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to cry so we could go to bed, like I always do. I didn't want him to hurt Mom."

The Boy climbed the ladder to his bunk, crawled under the covers, clasped his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling.