

# *The Disappearance of Bobo Blando*



*Denise DeVries*

# Prodigal Son

When I'm awakened by snores,  
I think I'm back home  
with the pigs. Animal warmth,  
plenty of food, and the smell  
of clean mud is my dream.  
Disillusioned with the scent  
of workers and consoling beer,  
I'm not a poet anymore. My fine fingers  
have been damaged  
building castles  
with nothing but my nails.  
My fine ideas asphyxiated  
turned to ashes  
in the exhaust of a bus,  
frozen in the freezing dawn.  
Swimming upstream in the river of time,  
my days turned to night, and nights to day,  
I dream of frost-slicked concrete  
and a heavy hammer to break the dawn...

Do you know, Father,  
what it is to rise and rest in darkness?  
I who spurned the dawn  
dream of the black rooster, the fighter  
the white dog tore to pieces,  
Now I'm the one plucked bare,  
seasoning for weak broth.

I want to come home, Father.  
Tell me if there is a corner  
left for me. I'll sing you  
the rooster's reveille,  
sleep with the pigs  
and eat from their trough.  
I no longer fear the war.  
Here, I'm buried alive,  
crushed by loneliness;  
not even Death respects me.  
I want to come home.

# Chapter One

## *The smell of clean mud*

On the night that Simón and Bobo were arrested and Bobo disappeared, Simón had finished the bottle of whiskey himself. Bobo Blando never drank. Some people say that Bobo once got drunk and gambled away his coffee plantation in Honduras, and after that he never touched alcohol again.

Simón and Bobo were at the usual hydrant halfway home from Doña Mara's *pupusería*, whistling and pretending to be just standing there looking at something. A woman in a white nightgown appeared in an upstairs window. Later Simón would remember one of those flashes of perfect contentment that appear unexpectedly a few times in life. The woman leaned on the sill into the unusually warm January night, the breeze stirred her long gold hair, and Simón crossed arcs with his best friend. He thought he might write a poem about it when he got home.

Seconds later, Simón heard a shout. He found himself face down in the wet grass with both arms pulled in a harsh grip. Once the cold steel closed around his wrists, a hand drove his face into the ground and pushed it until all he could smell was dirt.

Officer Hector Salazar had been driving home from a Neighborhood Watch meeting when Bobo and Simón were arrested, and he saw the beginning of it. He had been debating whether or not to pick up some roasted chicken with *yuca* or go straight to the house. Since he worked in Fairfax County and his wife Karen worked in Washington DC, they had bought a little townhouse in North Arlington. It was better that way, Hector thought. He wouldn't be running into people he knew in the grocery store. Hector's favorite part of the drive home was crossing the county line and knowing he was no longer responsible for every driver or passerby. Of course, if somebody's life were in danger, he would have to act, even outside his own county. On this night, as he slowed to turn a corner, he saw a couple of drunks urinating right next to a parked beige sedan in which two

plain clothes officers were writing up a report. He just shook his head, thought “poor jerks,” and drove on. He decided to go straight home.

\*\*\*

As she stepped out of the shower, Karen Salazar, née Waldenheimer, accidentally looked into the full-length mirror across from her. She usually managed to avoid it, but tonight she was calculating days of fertility, so she caught her own glance in the mirror. God, she looked tired. With her pale blonde hair wet and slicked back, her head looked like the skull in seventh grade science class. She scanned down her reflection. There were the same old saddlebags on her upper thighs, the ones that never seemed to diminish no matter how she exercised. Her ribs and collarbone were clearly visible, and the muscles on her arms and legs looked as tight and stringy as tendons. Her face was gaunt and yellowish, but the two deposits of fat on her thighs were as puffy and perky as ever. Just above them were the wide handles of her childbearing sized hips, and somewhere under the soft belly that no exercise could harden, was presumably the windswept desert of her hostile uterus.

Karen put on her robe and approached the mirror. There were lines around her eyes, and they weren't from smiling. Her thirty-third birthday was coming up, and shortly after that would be the thirteenth anniversary of her marriage to Hector. Would it be good luck or bad? Karen wondered. Something would have to change. And it had better be soon.

She looked at the mirror again. Why wasn't it steamy from her shower? As if in answer to her question, the blinds began to chatter. Of course. Hector had left the window open again. Karen slammed it down and then went off to bed to pretend she was asleep.

\*\*\*

The smell of dirt stayed with Simón for the next two months, and every time he slept he dreamed of the night that he and Bobo were arrested and Bobo disappeared.

One evening he awoke from the usual dream to the smell of tortillas and realized he was going to be late to work for the seventh time since the disappearance of Bobo Blando. Now he measured time by how many days had passed since Bobo Blando disappeared. This new calendar had replaced Simón's habit of dating everything from his arrival in Northern Virginia nearly ten years earlier.

Had it really been almost a decade? When Simón came to the United States from Guatemala to join his older brother Neles, the ink was barely dry on his high school diploma and he was full of ideas and plans. He would work and go to college. He'd continue to write poetry in Spanish and would soon begin to write in English too. He would be a modern-day Neruda, a voice for the oppressed. He and his brother would get a little place together, at least until they both married nice North American girls and started their families. He would find out Bobo Blando's real name and life story.

Nearly ten years had passed, and what did he have to show for it? He'd had a series of dead-end manual labor jobs, had sent a little money back home, and had added a few lines to his poem, "the Prodigal Son." Both he and his brother Neles had met American girls, but not what you'd call nice ones. They still lived in cramped quarters in their cousin Gato's apartment, and he knew little more about Bobo Blando than he had when they first met.

He was already five years overdue on the promise he had made to his parents when he left home. He had sworn that if he hadn't completed his education and settled down with a family within five years, he would return to Guatemala. His father had died during the fourth year, and he had convinced his mother to give him more time. Recently her letters and calls had become more urgent, begging Simón and Neles to come home while she was still young enough to enjoy her time with them.

The evening sun had just slid below the torn and yellowed shade, straight into his eyes. Simón had stayed awake too long reading *Siddhartha*. It took longer in English, and his large dictionary had ended up serving as his pillow. He still wasn't used to sleeping in daylight and working at night. He didn't hear the people upstairs arriving home from work yet, so it couldn't be that late. Maybe if he skipped his shower... He turned over and stared up at peeling plaster in the shape of the United States on the ceiling. Who would have known it was such a big place and so far away from home? Late again to his new job. They can't stand it when you're late. Simón's heart beat faster at the thought of having to invent another excuse for his boss.

Simón had started working nights just after Bobo Blando disappeared, and at first his brother Neles would telephone from work to wake him. Since their argument last Sunday, though, Neles wasn't even speaking to him. Neles thought Bobo Blando was dead, and Simón refused to believe it. "You need to start facing reality," Neles said. "You go around

dreaming with your head in the clouds, then wonder why you step in a puddle. Bobo is gone, and he's not coming back. Life has to go on."

This was the first time Simón and Neles had actually stopped speaking to each other, although they were opposites in every way. Neles was taller than Simón and more muscular. He seemed older than his twenty-eight years, and Simón at twenty-six looked much younger. Simón was wiry from playing soccer, but after a Northern winter his normally fair skin was blue-white, making his delicate features and dark eyes appear even more feminine than usual.

Their mother used to wear a big gold locket with pictures of their grandfathers whenever the whole family went out together. Simón resembled their paternal grandfather, Filberto, who was of a sensitive and artistic nature, but unfortunately never had the opportunity to learn to read because he had to run the family bakery. Simón remembered his grandfather, who died when Simón was four, as an angelically beautiful man with long smooth fingers and prominent wrist bones like his own. In old family photos, Grandfather Filberto had prematurely gray hair and dark slanted brows in a young face, and his clothes appeared to be of the finest quality.

Since Bobo Blando disappeared, Simón had been asking everyone he knew if they had a photograph of him, because as time passed, he was unable to hold an image of his face. Before, all Simón had wanted was to find out Bobo's real name. No one would admit to being the first to call him Bobo, which was a mild word for fool, but Simón's cousin Gato claimed that he added Blando as Bobo's last name because he seemed so soft and easygoing. "Like somebody you could push around," Gato would say, and laugh, because no matter what happened, Bobo couldn't be pushed around by anybody. Or so it had seemed until the night he disappeared.