
The Look-Alikes

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TRANSLATED BY DAVID WILLIAM FOSTER

In order to get to the dunes you had to cross the Prioral Plaza, go down Pagador Street to the end, go by the bull ring, and then you had to walk along the old Fuentebravía highway for a ways before turning right and crossing between the Portuense soccer field and the brick factory and entering the open area that ended in Puntilla Beach. The dunes were to the right and, to the left, the Nautical Club and the mouth of the Guadalete River. Just a little ways before the dunes, in the middle of some pine trees that looked like refugees from the stand of pines on the other side of the wall, was The Anchor.

“Let’s play look-alikes,” Medinilla said as the siren at the brick factory was blowing.

The siren sounded at six-o’clock sharp. The days were still long and lazy in September, but everybody removed their small changing tents from the beach, and since classes still hadn’t begun, we would be taken to have lunch at the dunes and would spend the afternoon playing until the sun went down and it turned cool. When the siren sounded at six it was as though the air recoiled like the neck of a salamander when it senses danger, and Medinilla barely had to time to propose the game for us to play without losing sight of the jam of cars that parked in front of The Anchor starting at the same time. You could see The Anchor perfectly from a rise next to the wall, and that’s where we would light ourselves a fire to roast pine cones and eat the pine nuts after letting them cool off on a smooth stone that Medinilla once said looked like a tombstone from the cemetery. Medinilla was always making strange and moving comparisons about everything, but what he was really an unrivaled ace at was finding similarities between people, which is why we would all stop eating pine nuts when a car would park in front of the chalet and a man would get out to go into the house to be with the women. Medinilla would quickly discover that each one of those men looked like someone.

“Don Estanislao,” he said the first time. “That one’s the spitting image of Don Estanislao.”

We all quickly agreed with him.

Don Estanislao was the director of the Fishing School, and it was anyone's guess as to why it had a name like that, and although Medinilla and I, who were both in prep school, saw little of him and never had anything to do with him, it was enough for Medinilla to say that Don Estanislao and the man who was entering The Anchor looked alike for none of us to disagree with him. The same stature, the same appearance of having just gotten up from a siesta and looking confused with his clothes a bit disarranged, the same gray hair, the same chubby, disjointed body, the same plodding and distrustful gait, as though he was always expecting to be met with a disagreeable surprise just around the corner. Perhaps Medinilla's ability lay not so much in immediately discerning similarities than his ability to persuade my brother Manolín, my cousin Carlos and me to accept unquestioningly the similarities that would promptly occur to him.

"Why is Don Estanislao coming to spend time with the women?" my brother Manolín asked. He still couldn't understand that a man could look so much like someone else without actually being that other person.

I explained to Manolín and my cousin Carlos, who were two years younger than Medinilla and me, that it wasn't Don Estanislao, but a man who looked a lot like him, but that Don Estanislao, who, even though he was the director of the Fishing School, was a man just like everyone else, a man of flesh and blood, a real man, and all men like to spend some time with the women now and then at The Anchor or some other place like The Anchor. Of course, some men didn't go to The Anchor every now and then, but went as much as two or three times a week, like that guy who looked so much like Alfonso Rendón, the notary who lived next to the Technical Institute and was a friend of my father's.

"Yes, that one," Medinilla said to me one afternoon, pointing out a thin, blond man who was wearing a common guayabera like the kind my father used and who had arrived at The Anchor on foot, as though he had no car or didn't know how to drive, just like my father didn't know how to drive, "that one who just went in the chalet, he looks a lot like your father."

"Then, he looks a lot like me," Manolín said, all happy, because everybody said that my father and Manolín were like two peas in a pod, so much alike you couldn't tell them apart, so much so that there could never be any doubt that my father was Manolín's father. By contrast, my father could be the used clothes dealer who came by the front of my house every Saturday, with his broken-down cart and shouting "Used Clooooothes!" Or maybe it was the itinerant taffy vendor, as Antonia, our baby-sitter, used to say whenever she wanted to needle me and make me cry.

Antonia, our baby-sitter, and Jesusa, the baby-sitter of my cousins Carlos and Rosa, who was not yet walking, were thick as thieves and would spend the entire afternoon on the dunes yakking and paying little attention to what us older kids were doing. Medinilla had no baby-sitter and would pal around with us every day on the dunes, at least until school started. That way, according to my mother, Medinilla's mother saved herself the cost of hiring a girl. Whenever Medinilla came along with us and our baby-sitters, he was always thinking up things to do, games or contests that he tried hard not to win, as though he thought he had to entertain us and allow us to win in exchange for the cost of a girl that his mother got away without paying. The only game he didn't allow us to win, maybe because the baby-sitters were not around, was the one of the look-alikes.

"Get a load of how that man who's just gotten out of the Citroën looks like the priest from Prioral," Medinilla said one afternoon when night was about to fall and only a moment before we could hear off in the distance the thick and solemn horn of the boat from Cádiz, entering the channel in the last of its daily runs. That sounded to me like heresy. But Medinilla had the ability to convince me that he was always on the mark when he discovered a look-alike, even if it was heresy. I had no way to contradict Medinilla.

The man who had just gotten out of the Citroën looked exactly like Father Agustín, who had a Citroën like that, and there was no way he could have looked more like the priest from Prioral, even without his cassock, but perhaps he was on his way to hear incognito the confession of the women of The Anchor or to give Extreme Unction to Leonor dos Santos, the owner, an ancient Portuguese woman with a character like sour milk, according to a commentary Antonia made once, so there was nothing strange about her suddenly having a severe attack of colic. I had seen Leonor dos Santos one afternoon in Victoria Park, accompanied by a rundown, unpleasant looking women of about fifty who obeyed without blinking everything the other woman said, and when they walked by us, Antonia nudged Jesusa and said under her breath, "That's the owner of The Anchor and the other's her lover." I had no idea how long Leonor dos Santos had been the owner of the chalet where the men who looked so much like the men I knew went to spend time with the women, but Medinilla explained to me that house had once belonged to a well-to-do family that had lost everything. And he said it, according to my mother who heard him say it, with relish, as though he had something against well-to-do families. To tell the truth, the house wasn't very large or impressive, but if it looked sleepy and downcast during the day, starting at six in the evening, once the siren of the brick factory had sounded, it was filled with light and comings and goings, and there probably was no place else in the Port

that was as entertaining. There was nothing strange about Father Agustín want to be inside there, even if it was via another man who looked like him or in order to hear the confession of Leonor dos Santos's women.

And my cousin Carlos, despite being a runt, wanted to be there inside too, and he started in on trying to see all the time if there was a man who looked like him.

"Of course there is," Medinilla finally said, making a big deal out of it, as though taking the blame for not having caught on before, although you could tell in an instant that he was just saying it so Carlos would stop bugging us about it. "The other day I saw a guy who could have been your twin brother, but of course older than you. What I mean is that, when you're a bit older you'll look like his twin brother. I'm sure he'll be back today."

And he did come back. Of course he came back. Medinilla was never wrong. It was as though God Our Father had helped him forecast the future in exchange for not having made his parents little bit better off so they could pay a baby-sitter. And that was how my cousin Carlos ended up so happy when, just as night was falling, Medinilla pointed to a man who pulled up in a fancy car that Carlos really liked a lot, and there was no question that the man and Carlos looked alike. Medinilla began to tell us how, despite the fact that it was already dark, that man's eyes, nose, mouth, chin, in short, everything made him look just like Carlos. I didn't dare think that maybe the similarity was not all that great and that Medinilla, just to show us how great he was at playing look-alikes, was taking advantage of the darkness.

On the other hand, I couldn't even think something like that, even though I might have dared to, when Medinilla very proudly said, staring me in the face:

"Just look at how much that man and I look alike."

That was on one of the last days of September, right before we had to go back to school. It was turning chilly early and we had to take a sweater to the dunes, because otherwise by five o'clock in the afternoon we would be getting goosebumps. It was like the air was wet with humidity, and it looked like the lights arose soaking wet from the canal where, eight round trips a day, the steamship from Cádiz came and went. Medinilla looked in the direction of The Anchor so I would too and I saw the man who, according to Medinilla, looked so much like him. He was standing alongside a black car big as a barge, looking like he was waiting for someone. He was young and had the look of an athlete and he reminded me of Joaquín Blume when his picture came out in *Nodo* shaking hands with Franco, dressed in dark clothes, with a jacket and tie, hair all combed back and undoubtedly smelling of good cologne and wearing gold cufflinks. There was no need for Medinilla to say anything in order for me to see how much alike they

looked. The same cut of the face, the same hair color, the same way of sticking their arm out then pulling it back a bit to turn the wrist to check the time by their stainless steel watch, the latest fashion. I understood how Medinilla could be proud of looking so much like a man like that. Medinilla, in addition to playing the game of look-alikes like no one else, was very lucky.

It was still too early for the men to arrive, except for the one who looked like Medinilla, and then suddenly the door of The Anchor opened and one of Leonor dos Santos's girls appeared looking happy, very tanned and darling in a print dress with a wide hem and cut far too low for as cold as it was. The man and the girl from The Anchor kissed and then the man opened the door of the big car for her and bowed in a way that reminded me how Medinilla would, half in jest and half seriously, when he allowed me to be the first to enter a place. Come to think of it, it wasn't so much that the man's bow and Medinilla's looked so much alike, but that they were identical. Medinilla looked at me as though to say, "You see?" And then Antonia and Jesusa began to shout to us that it was time to go back home.

We walked back as always through the open field, then along between the Portuense playing field and the brick factory, and then we turned left to follow the old Fuentebravía highway, alongside the bullring and then up Pagador Street to cross the Prioral Plaza, but I couldn't forget The Anchor, full of women in low-cut dresses and men who looked like Don Estanislao, Father Agustín, the notary who was a friend of my father's, my father, and Manolín, Carlos, Medinilla. It was so cold that we would probably not go back to the dunes until the spring, and until then we would not see the men who entered The Anchor and who looked so much like everybody, and when I entered my house I was sad and startled and so mad that I wanted to burst out crying. I didn't know if it was Medinilla's fault, if he did it on purpose. Or if it was the fault of the itinerant taffy vendor who was my father instead of my father. Or if it was the fault my bad luck. Or if it was the fault of my being different from the others, of not looking like anyone else. Because none of those men who went to The Anchor to spend time with the women looked like me. ✨