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The Sword and the Dove

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Santa Clara University

The Sword and the Dove

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Canterbury Fellowship Presentation

Faculty mentors: Dr. Cynthia Mahamdi and Dr. Juan Velasco

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Chapter One

Toledo, Spain. 1498

The girl looks straight into the late-afternoon sun. It's just for an instant, and by accident, but it fills her eyes and head with searing, lingering light. She continues to laugh and dance her feet back and forth in the riverbank, slashing the air in front of her with a wooden toy sword. The shallow water licks around her ankles.

"I'll get you this time!" she cries, swiping in the direction of her adversary. She is deflected with a splintered jolt, wood on wood. The sunburst fades from the girl's sight, leaving just a few spots behind, and her surroundings reappear, vivid as ever: trees and clouds above her, the steep, earthy slope crowned with the city wall behind her. Watchtowers, treetops, and the arches of San Martín's Bridge are smeared on the surface of the Tagus River, upside-down and undulating in the water's late-day sheen.

The girl and the boy she is fighting are reflected as well. She is tall, for a six-year-old—thin-limbed and graceless with olive skin and long, twisty curls. He is not so young; at twelve years, he towers above her like cavalry over a foot soldier. His shoulders have begun to broaden and his movements bear the mark of beginning swordsman's training. His hair and skin are fair but his eyes are so dark, like two large drops of oil.

The girl lunges forward again, and is blocked. Quick as a bird, she tries again—this time she knocks the boy's play weapon hard enough that he loses his grip. Before he's recovered, she taps his ribs lightly with her sword.

She hollers, tosses the toy to dry land, and spins in a circle, kicking up as much water as she can.

“Why do *you* get to be a knight? Should be me,” she says. The boy doesn’t laugh with her. He stands still, knuckles white on the crude wooden hilt.

“I let you win. I was feeling generous.”

“You did not!” she says, and makes a face. “If you’re going to lose to a girl, at least be *honorable*.”

The boy’s lip curls but he says nothing, so she turns her back to him and shields her eyes from the sun. On the opposite bank of the Tagus, a hundred white birds rise in panicked, rippled unison above the rocks and trees. She watches in silence for a few seconds, wondering what creature is hunting them, when a blow lands between her shoulders. It sends her flying forward, sinks her hands and knees deep into the mud. A stinging pain spreads through her back where the boy has struck her, perhaps hard as he can, with his sword’s broad edge.

“You call *me* dishonorable?” he shouts above her. “You, from a family of ... a family like yours?”

“Rodrigo, stop. I hate when you talk about that.”

“I’ll stop when you remember who I am. And who *you* are. I can say whatever I want to you.” He stares at her, and rubs his fingertips with his thumb.

“I’m going home.” She stands and wipes her muddy hands on her wet, ruined skirt. “My abuela says you ought to play with friends your own age. She says—she says it’s *peculiar* that you don’t have any.”

He scowls, both hands tightening and twisting on the hilt.

“Your abuela is the judge of normal and peculiar? The old witch who wasn’t born a Christian?”

The girl flinches at this. She runs toward the sprawling tree where she’s left her shoes and stuffs her wet feet inside. The leather bites back against her toenails with each step she takes away from the boy.

“Don’t think anyone’s forgotten that,” Rodrigo shouts after her.

She keeps her head down and hurries to the small side gate in the city wall, again breaking into a run.

Behind her, the boy’s voice is suddenly higher, scraping towards a whine: “Wait! Wait, Paloma, come back.”

She does not look back.

“Paloma, you know I didn’t *mean* it.”

She’s on an outer street of Toledo before she slows down.

Hay is scattered on the street, and dirty children with hair like thistle patches totter among pigs and chickens. Paloma steps over something thick and dark seeping between the cobblestones and keeps her gaze away from the horse lying dead some yards away. As she gets deeper into Toledo, the streets become narrow and winding and slope upward. Somewhere, a lady screams at her servant for burning the Friday fish; somewhere else, a drunkard hollers wordlessly and a pack of dogs howl in response. A beggar sitting on the street reaches out to her with a four-fingered hand.

She exits the street to avoid a plaza, slipping into back alleys where the low sun can’t reach. The mud has dried and caked on her skirt; she tries to brush some off as she walks. Stone

arches dwell above her and garments on the clotheslines are caught in a sudden draft of wind. The sleeves twist and the legs kick, like evil spirits dancing.

In a particularly gray and narrow street where a draft of wind is blowing, Paloma stops before a tall, narrow house crammed between the shops of a stonemason and a cobbler. Above the door hangs a wooden sign, creaking restlessly in the draft, engraved with an image of a sword. Beside it is a window, covered with a grate of iron bars. She reaches down into her dress, retrieves a key from the string around her neck, and leans her body into the door to push it open.

Inside is dark, but a ray of light entering the barred window gleams off of steel and sharp edges, knives fanned out precisely, glossy blades in stacks and rows—a smithy's showroom, and a forge adjoined in back. Most days the forge echoes with her father's hammer screaming against the anvil, alight with cascades of sparks and weapons glowing orange from within.

Most children must be instructed: "*be careful with this thing or that,*" and "*never touch fire*". Paloma was born with this knowledge already inside her.

She walks through the forge, up the creaking stairs in the back, and ascends into the softer realm of her family's home.

Here it smells of dust and spices. One candle is left burning for her; it flickers on a table, revealing a low slanted ceiling, woven rugs, and chairs topped with patterned pillows. The door to the room she shares with her abuela is open. The room is empty. Beside it, the door to her mother and father's room is shut tightly. To the left is a small kitchen, the walls covered with hanging cookware, and a round fireplace burning low with a cast-iron pot inside. Paloma takes off her shoes and goes over to see a bubbling stew with rice and onions and small chunks of beef. She knows not to tell anyone that she eats meat for Friday supper.

The house is silent. She pulls a chair into the kitchen and is warming her hands up close to the fire when her parents' door opens.

"Paloma. You're late."

"I'm sorry, Abuela. Why are you in Mama and Papa's room?"

The old woman's steel-gray hair is loose from its bun and hanging around her shoulders. Her eyes are bright like dark pearls against the wizened netting of her olive face. She says nothing about Paloma's muddied clothes—just stares fiercely at her. Or through her.

"Just remember we must be home by sundown on Friday. Why must we, my granddaughter?"

"Because tonight is a holy night," Paloma recites. "And we must light a candle. And I must never tell a soul."

"No, you mustn't," Abuela whispers.

"Is Mama in there?"

"She is."

"With my baby brother or sister?"

"Yes, still in her belly."

"Abuela, you look scared."

"Scared? No," the old woman says. "But—come with me to your mother's room, dear. She is in a lot of pain and would like to see you."

Paloma doesn't move. "Is my brother or sister going to die in her belly again?" Abuela just shakes her head and says nothing, so Paloma follows her, hesitating at the door. The room is filled with thick fumes of incense and yellow flames of candles; the window and curtains are

shut against the evening air. A hamsa hangs on each of the four walls and the bedside drawer is stuffed with pungent garlic. Defense against the *ojo kui*, the evil eye.

Her mother lies flat in bed, a pillow behind her neck, her belly big as a cauldron and covered in a blanket, rising and falling in time with short breaths. Beads of moisture on her forehead catch the candlelight.

“Paloma,” she says, her voice tight. “Paloma, I fear God won’t let this child arrive peacefully in the world. But he will arrive. I promise you.”

Paloma has never seen her lovely mother like this—hair soaked in sweat, skin pale like a canvas stretched over high cheekbones, lips dry and pulled back in a twitching grin. Paloma reaches for her abuela, who takes her small hands in her dry, withered ones. “Where’s Papa?” the little girl asks.

“He’ll be back soon—” Abuela begins, but her mother interrupts through gritted teeth.

“Off being a hero, *making plans*. Where will his big plans get him, once he’s caught—?”

“Levana! Not in front of the girl.”

“The girl needs to know something. *I* need to know she’s learned a few more lessons, before...” her voice trails as she winces. “Please, tell her of the Maiden of Sevilla. Paloma,” she peers at her daughter over her belly. “Abuela is going to tell you a story.”

The old woman stares at the shadowy form on the bed. She sinks to the wooden chair beside it and pulls Paloma in, hugging her in her arms—they are lean and hard, like a much younger woman’s. She rocks her back and forth for a minute before she begins to speak.

“Far away in the South, there is a sun-drenched city where fruit hangs heavy on the trees, like jewels on a *doña*’s earlobes. A long time ago, a beautiful girl lived in that city. She had thick black curls and a gap between her two front teeth.”

“Like me?” Paloma says. She whistles weakly through her gap, but it doesn’t make her abuela laugh.

“Exactly like you—just a little older. Now, the girl’s heart was carefree; it flitted about like a butterfly in the wind, until it landed on a young nobleman on the other side of the city. Listen well, Paloma—he was a Christian and she was Sephardi. He lived in a grand spacious home, and she lived in a cramped quarter along with all the other Jews of the city. But when they met, always in secret, their differences were meaningless and forgotten. When they were together, everything looked different to the girl; she could count a hundred shades of scarlet in a single flower he gave her. As soon as they were apart, the flower was just red, and most other things were gray. Someday, my dear, *you* may love someone like that.”

Paloma considers this. “I don’t think so,” she says. “How did the girl meet the boy?”

Paloma’s mother says, g “That part makes no difference.” There is pain straining behind her every word. “Just understand, she went mad for him! She lost her mind.”

Her breath becomes ragged again, and Abuela continues.

“Yes, she lost her mind. When she said his name, it tasted like almond cake on her tongue. When she saw his face, she swayed on a cloud between the stars and the earth. She lived off his promises and pretty whispers. She breathed them like air.

“But there was a terrible, terrible complication, my granddaughter. The girl’s father was plotting an uprising among the Sephardim, the Jews of the city.”

“Why?” says Paloma.

“Because—well, you see, the Jewish quarter used to be wonderful. There was music, kosher markets, poetry and prayer. But then all the city’s Sephardim were forced to move there and it became crowded, and tinged in shame. No Jew could keep weapons, or ride horses, or wear fine clothes. They all had to sew a red badge on their shirts and grow their beards long. Do you understand the life that I am describing?”

“What about the ladies?” Paloma giggles. “Did they have to grow beards?”

Abuela only purses her lips.

“Pay attention. I’m telling you that we—*they*, the Jews of this story—used to have something, but it was taken from them. Some, like the beautiful girl’s father, were so angry that they wanted to take up weapons and fight to get it back.

“She was devastated when she overheard the plan, of course, for the Christian nobleman, her own love, was marked to be killed. What do you suppose she did?”

Paloma wraps her arms tighter around her grandmother. “I don’t like this story. Will you tell another?”

“No, little dove, you must hear this one. What she did was warn her sweetheart that his life was in danger. She begged him to run away from the city and save himself.”

Paloma sighs aloud in relief, then coughs; the room is clouded with incense and garlic vapors. Her mother’s voice cuts in again. “She was a *fool*. Tell Paloma that she was a fool.”

“Levana, calm yourself! You must rest ... Yes, the girl was a fool. She knew he loved her and would do nothing to harm her, but she thought no further than that. She never dreamed he would spread the warning that she so tearfully whispered to him in private, never dreamed it would start a massacre ... All the Jews of the city, all her neighbors, friends, and family—slain.

The Jewish quarter flowed with rivers of blood. And her own father was killed before an audience—burned to ash on the stake.”

Paloma starts to cover her ears with her hands, but the old woman gently removes them and holds Paloma’s chin, turning the child’s face toward hers.

“Dearest, you must hear this, you must hear every word. The beautiful girl was right to believe her sweetheart would not harm *her*. He stole her away from the bloodshed, had her baptized and sent away to a nunnery, where she began dying as soon as she arrived. Every day and night for a week she cried into the rosary beads that they gave her, thinking of what she’d done by telling that secret. She cried until her tears drowned her.

“With her last breath, she begged that her body be brought back to her house in the Jewish quarter, and that her head be cut off and set upon a tall spear beside her door. Then everyone would know that it was the house of the girl who betrayed her father, and her people, for love.”

Paloma blinks and sniffs. Abuela’s voice is barely more than a whisper. “The nuns of the convent did with her corpse as she wished. Her skull is there still, in that city, beside her door, set upon a spear.”

Outside, church bells begin to chime. Paloma’s mother lets out an otherworldly wail that rings in the air long after the bells have gone quiet.

Chapter Two

History

Paloma Azulay's father was a sword maker. Her grandfather was also a sword maker, as was his grandfather, and his great-grandfather, and three-dozen grandfathers before him. The first in Paloma's line to take up the craft was Salamon Azulay, a shepherd who'd followed the seasons and sheep until he was one day rooted by a deep longing to sleep each night in the same bed. His family had lived in that country since long before Spain was called Spain.

He and his wife Miriam arrived in the city of Toledo in the year of Jesus Christ 587 as two friendless wanderers. This was before the reign of the Moorish kings; it was a time when Sephardim were not welcomed kindly, no matter how tied to the land their bloodlines might be. Nonetheless, Salamon Azulay sold his flock and bought a house in a narrow, winding street in the shadowed heart of the city, and there, he built a forge.

His neighbors whispered when he belted his doors and windows with iron bars; he told them it was to protect his wares from thieves. He told Miriam it was because he still preferred the company of sheep to townsfolk, and she only shrugged at his half-truth. She'd seen enough in her lifetime to understand the precaution.

In Salamon's forge, generations of Azulays perfected their craft. They heated and hammered and sharpened steel, bent for hours over a furnace and white-hot iron. When their sweat fell in their work, it hissed and rose up as steam; this was before Europeans had machines that whistled and boiled and took the brunt of the labor for them.

Azulay swords became known throughout the region. They were exquisite enough to hang on castle walls—graceful, balanced, but deadly as well. So sharp, a drop of blood fell from any finger that tested a blade.

The forge was the family's legacy, seemingly as old as the city itself. Salamon was tempering steel even before the thick wall wrapped around Toledo, and fortresses rose from the ground, and turrets pierced the sky. During this time the city came under Muslim rule; the caliphs left the Azulays free to be Sephardic, to pray and celebrate as such.

The city grew around them into a garden of arched synagogues and slender minarets and sturdy bell towers. It took several centuries, but by the time of Paloma's great-grandparents, they had just about forgotten why their ancestor had ever fixed bars on the windows. Their lives were open; they played music and read from the Torah in the shade of outdoor awnings. It was a Golden Age for Jews and Muslims and Christians, and golden ideas bloomed forth. The *convivencia* lasted seven hundred years.

With the turn of time and shift of powers, the Muslim rule came to an end—and with it, the tolerance of the different faiths. Paloma, for her part, grew up grateful for the rusting bars on her window. She knew the importance of closing up, tightly as a flower against the rain.

The bars—and perhaps the practice of swordmaking—had much to do with her ancestor's childhood. Salamon was born somewhere in the South, where gardens weren't made of stone, but of jasmine and cypress. Something had sparked a riot in his village—maybe a failed harvest, maybe a bout of plague. All that mattered was that his family was Jewish, and the villagers believed it was the Sephardim who cursed wheat fields and poisoned well water. Salamon was the only one of his family to escape, and how could he forget the children impaled, the houses in

flames, the women screaming to the night? When he settled in Toledo, it wouldn't be without battlements.

Paloma was born in 1492, nearly a thousand years after Salamon, into a world that bore a cruel resemblance.