Two Ears and a Tale

Bob Chatterson

Western Michigan University

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Bartolomo is a small Spanish town which is pretty at this time of the year. There are quaint village houses with thatch roofs and pretty girls and bullfighters and bulls.

This was the season of the bullfights. The bulls were leading seven to five and so I hailed an old, rattling taxi and made my way to the arena on the east end of the village because I had heard that Senor Cisco was to be the number one attraction and I had not seen him in a long time.

The afternoon was warm, and the stands were crowded with shouting people who were dressed in gay, multicolored clothes and they were waving and smiling, drinking out of goat-skin pouches.

The arena was round and on one end there was an opening where the bulls came out. There was sand on the floor of the arena and it looked clean and pure in the sunshine. I sat down and took a swallow from the bota of wine I had and it was warm in my stomach and made me feel a little gay.

There was a roar from the crowd as Senor Cisco made his appearance in the arena. He was dressed simply in scarlet toreador pants, slit to his thighs on the side, a chartreuse, lace-trimmed shirt and a large Napoleon hat. He bowed gracefully to the crowd, snapped his pink cape and beckoned the first bull.

I watched with interest as Senor Cisco displayed his skill. He sidestepped beautifully, taunting the huge black beast that charged time and again at the cape. As the band struck up, Senor Cisco deftly maneuvered with the beast. He would be a killer in a mambo, I laughed to myself, not knowing quite why I laughed and not caring and wondering if Senor Cisco would laugh if he knew I was laughing about something which I did not know whether to laugh or not. I took a drink from the bota of wine.


The big moment came. The bull, bleeding from several places where he had been pierced with the pike and panting from the strain of battle, stood still to catch his breath. With intrepid bravery, Senor
Cisco stabbed the beast in the heart and it was all over.

The applause was deafening. Hats, flowers, pillows, and an occasional grapefruit sailed down into the arena and fell next to the modest, bowing Senor Cisco. Senor Cisco, head high, shoulders square, departed from the arena wiping the remains of a well-aimed egg from his forehead.

I dropped in on Cisco a few minutes later. He was lying on an old iron stand bed in his dressing room when I walked in. “Hello, Senor Cisco,” I said, unscrewing the top of my bota of wine.

He sat up, his face old and wrinkled. He took the bota, licking his parched, blue lips. “Ah, Virginia Dare wine,” he said. He looked up at me then. “Ernie, how are you?”

“Fine,” I said. “And you?”

“I am tired,” he said, lying back down on the bed and sighing. “I am getting too old for the bullfights. Youth, they are the ones who will inherit the earth.”

It was a profound statement. It was good to know that sometimes even a bullfighter could be a philosopher. “You are right Cisco,” I said.

“It is good to know that a man has friends, though, Ernie,” he said, looking at me and smiling again. “Are you writing now?”

I sat down on the edge of the bed and lighted a cigarette. “I was thinking about writing something about bullfighters. Maybe a novel.”

“Good,” Senor Cisco sat up, took another gulp of my wine and wiped off his mouth on his satin sleeve. “I am glad to hear that, Ernie, because bullfighting is an art and it deserves proper recognition.” His eyes shone with a passionate flame. “When you stick el toro in the heart it is then that that Moment of Truth becomes meaningful to you. Do you understand me, Ernie?”

“Yes,” I said. “I understand. But tell me how it feels to face the bulls. It is not that I am afraid to go into the arena with a bull to find out, it is just that I am paralyzed with courage.”

“Tell me,” he said. “What do you think a great bull fighter thinks when he faces the charge of a maddened brute?”

I shrugged. “Deep down I suppose you are afraid. But, on the surface, your skill and final courage are the only things that show. Am I right?”

Senor Cisco laughed slyly. “I am never afraid, Ernie,” he said. “The bull is half dead before it even comes out in the arena. I dance a little, whirl a bit and stab it to death. It is all very boring. But
never tell people that in your novel. This is a good way to make a living."

Just then Senor Flio came rushing into the room. He held two ears and a tail. "Ah," he said excitedly, his youthful face flushed with victory, his white teeth flashing, black eyes dancing with ecstasy. "I have killed my first bull, Senor Cisco. What do you think of that?"

"That evens the score," Senor Cisco replied thoughtfully. "Next week, when I meet the fierce bull of Altamadas, I will have a chance to put the matadors out in front eight to seven."

"Yes, yes," the youth said, bowing eagerly. "I owe you so much for teaching me your art, Senor Cisco. I do not know how ever to repay you."

"Money will be fine," Cisco replied, holding out a large silver basin with his coat of arms painted in bold blood designs upon it. Senor Flio clinked ten pesos in the basin and departed whistling the first movement of Rachmaninoff's concerto in C sharp minor.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"It is Flio. He is young and full of courage. He will soon take my place."

I remained silent, let ting Senor Cisco mull over his thoughts. It is hard for a man to know that he is on his way out and that death stands a little ways off, smiling and confident. Senor Cisco said at last, "I have not long to live and it is strange and terrible to face death alone."

"You never married?" I asked.

"Women," he scoffed. "Women are unworthy of love."

I nodded my head in agreement and we each drank several botas of wine in silence. I passed out long before dark.

It was early in the morning and chilly when I awoke and found myself alone in Cisco's dressing room. I vowed fiercely because I had a bad hangover. I showered and shaved and left the dressing room. It took me most of the morning to discover where Senor Cisco lived, but I did not see him again for a few days because I bought some wine to help cure my hangover and I slept a good part of the week in the gutters.

Then, one calm, bright day, I went to see him again. The taxi stopped before a magnificent Gothic castle set back off the road and hedged in with shrubbery and trees and flowers. I walked past the fragrant flowers and pounded on the solid, worm-eaten wooden door.

Senor Cisco threw the bolt and admitted me. He was dressed in his simple bullf ighting costume.
"Why are you dressed in your bullfighter's costume?" I asked.
"I had hoped to talk more about bull-fighting."
He sighed, resting upon his sword for a moment, and spoke. "This afternoon is the big bullfight between me and the bull of Altamadas. It is fortunate that you came along now. Will you help me practice?"
"Yes," I said. "What do you want me to do?"
"You will be the bull," he replied, galloping about the room, thrusting with his sword and whirling quickly and flicking his cape.
"Come now," he shouted, a look of easy confidence on his face.
"Charge me."
Feeling silly, I got down on all fours and charged the cape. Senor Cisco was quite slow. If I were a bull, I thought, I would gore him into the ground, and so thinking I charged swiftly and butted up and under the flicking cape, knocking him down. He lay there, stunned for a moment.
"Ah," he sat up, his deep-set eyes aflame. "So you are playing for real, eh?" As he swung the sword roundhouse, I held up my hand signalling that I was ready to quit, and lost three fingers to the second knuckle. "This is dangerous play," I said, licking the blood from the fingers. "Let us call it a day."
"Good," he wiped the blood on his cape and smiled. He produced two bottles of wine. "Let us drink a toast."
"To the defeat of the bull of Altamadas," I said, tipping my bottle.
"Skoal," he replied.

That afternoon I felt funny all the way to the arena. Senor Cisco sat in the back seat of the cab, his wrinkled face thoughtful, eyes closed. I cannot explain it but I sensed death in the atmosphere. It was, I think, the smell. A thick, pungent, unpleasant odor, like decay, filled the back seat of the cab. Perhaps it was because Senor Cisco did not believe in bathing. At any rate, I expected the worst.

It was a clear afternoon. I could hear the shouting of the crowd and see the brilliant-colored clothes they wore. Yet, something touched my heart like an icy finger. My palms were wet with cold sweat when Senor Cisco made his bow in the arena.

There was a tremendous ovation and flowers descended upon the hero of Spain. There were hisses and boos for the huge, fierce bull of Altamadas who was led into the arena. Cisco stared impassively at the bull.

Would the burning will of this old man triumph over the maddened instinct of a brute beast? It must, for in that instant when
the sword point rends the heart of the bull bringing black oblivion to its suffering, all the meaning of life becomes clear. It is that illuminating Moment Of Truth.

I forced myself to sit back and relax against the shapely legs of a senorita.

The bull thundered toward Senor Cisco then, snorting with inflamed rage, eyes hot and alert upon the flicking cape. Feint, sidestep, manuever, tease, whirl. I watched Senor Cisco intently. And then, it came. That Moment Of Truth.

The bull, feigning exhaustion, went down on one knee. Senor Cisco charged, sword poised for the kill. The crowd roared and the stands shook with excitement.

I felt myself tense and tried to rise, but the shapely legs of the senorita behind held me in their vice.

The bull weaved, came up swiftly and gored Senor Cisco in the breast.

"Thees ees boring, no?" the senorita behind me whispered in my ear.

I looked up at her and she was smiling with white teeth and black, snapping eyes and she was slim and pretty.

Senor Flio came into the arena then and he looked competent and poised. As Cisco lay there bleeding into the sand, his face composed in death, the bull trotted up, lopped off his ears with the sword and held them aloft to a stunned crowd. There was a smattering of applause.

I relaxed and lighted a cigarette because there was nothing else to do. The wheel of life had completed one cycle and was now beginning a new one. I did not feel so bad about Cisco then.

I took the senorita's arm and we both laughed as we left the arena arm in arm, and we stopped along the way to her hacienda and I bought two botas of wine. I decided to go to the bullfights tomorrow, if I did not have a hangover.

It occured to me later, as I sat at my typewriter, that it would be much easier to write a novel about Senoritas.