

# Eulogy on Calle San Justo

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**F**or weeks afterwards the earliest stirrings in the street came from traders in hearsay. In twos and threes people met on the spot and exchanged pieces of information, offered and coaxed opinions, fingers pointing, arms folded and akimbo, eyes widening, heads nodding.

They were discussing the owl and the owl man. The gossip, spoken clearly without whispers, enjoyed right of way amid the usual morning street noise.

Jackhammers deferred, garbage trucks showed restraint, the pigeons held themselves in check. So that the scuttlebutt traveled as if piped into the windows of the apartments facing Calle San Justo.

Picture the owl man. He lives on the east side of the street. He lives in a kennel on the second floor, with a balcony, actually a fenced-in ledge. The balcony's wrought iron is rusted through, it's wooden rail as rotted as the owl man's teeth.

The owl is a decoy. It's big and brown and fools more people than pigeons into thinking it's real. The plastic, neckless bird with permanently raised eyebrows casts a fixed glance down the narrow corridor toward the bay. The man perched the bird at the corner of the balcony. He fastened it as tightly to the rail as he did to his own identity. For people now associated the man with the mascot.

He is a man of certain habits. No item of refuse is too putrid, filthy or large, he will throw it out his window onto the street. He takes most pleasure in doing so while people watch. He waits until making eye contact with someone, until he can visually dare someone to object.

Then he spitefully tosses an aluminum can, a styrofoam cup, a sandwich. Or if he's cooking, witnesses are treated to an indifferent fling of the spoon, splattering lard or some tripe on the cobblestone below.

Any piece of paper is an excuse for a personal ticker-tape parade. Occasionally, an entire bag of garbage gets chucked over the side. And it's beyond him to ever check for pedestrians first.

At Christmas time, he buys a new set of lights for the balcony. He strings them ever so carefully one night, arranging blinking bulbs up to the tips of the owl's ears. It

surprises no one when the box the lights came in gets thrown casually into the street, where it lays until washed away by rain.

Besides littering, there are other offending peculiarities. He is given to belching, to wretchedly loud coughing in the middle of the night, is not a fan of personal hygiene and has a mean streak.

An amateur opera singer provoked it once by showcasing his craft below the wrong window. The owl man sent a gallon-size jar tumbling off the balcony in response. It shattered at the tenor's feet, hurling shards at the singer and his companions.

The owl man has little tolerance for people whose musical abilities fall short of his own, which are considerable. That's one of his few redemptions. Oh he can play. Congas, timbales, cow bells. He raps the owl in the head every once in a while, to extend the tonal range of his percussion kit.

He is likely to give a concert at any time of day. Usually every day. Sometimes twice a day. They are never short. And he always plays to an orchestra, courtesy of his nuclear-powered stereo system. Over the years he has coded every groove of his album collection into his own cellular makeup. The fresh beats he lays over the recorded merengue are never off their mark. His rhythm is furious and flawless.

Drawing aside the pink plastic shower curtain that serves as his door, he steps out onto the balcony that serves as his stage. He is shirtless and thickly whiskered. Sweat already trickles down his dark chest and runs over his distended belly.

He sits on a crate facing the bay. He takes up his drum sticks, or pencils, or spoons, or whatever he will use to bang his heart out. And stereo blaring, he begins to pump with his hands. Tooka choom tooka choom pdata pa pa dibidiba dibidaba brrrrrrrr fwa! Ding ding ding ding. Brrrrrrrrrr ding tooka choom choom fwa! Boom keta keta boom koomba...

He's better than the percussionists on the albums, better. Come to your window and see for yourself. Stop in the street and applaud. Pay him the slightest ovation and he will be grateful. He will acknowledge with a grizzled grin, a tip of his baseball cap, maintaining assault on the bell with one hand. But he will never stop. That is another distinction between him and the albums. You can turn an album off.

During the last San Sebastián Festival, the owl man plays a marathon concert lasting nearly the entire 72 hours. Not long afterwards, a month maybe, he dies.

That's when the people in the street started appearing in the mornings, pointing to where the owl was removed. The absent bird moved them to gather with their bits and pieces of the story.

"Dead two days before anyone found him." "He died tying his shoes on." "Aneurysm."

"Heart attack." "Stroke." "Diabetes." "Bigote..."

Bigote, the owl man's formal nickname, peppered all conversation on the street for a time after his death. The few who did not know it while he was alive, learned it after his sudden disappearance.

"Bigote died in his chair," said Porfirio, a local handyman. "I was the first to see him. He was all twisted up stiff and yellow. He had one shoe tied. There were flies coming in and out of his mouth. It stunk like urine."

One day Bigote's sister came to Porfirio hysterical. She hadn't been able to contact her brother for a while. "He won't answer the phone," she told Porfirio. Porfirio borrowed a ladder and climbed to the balcony.

"He was definitely dead. His stomach wasn't moving and his eyes were rolled back into his head. But I didn't want to hit her too hard with the news, so I told her, yelled down that he was fainted," Porfirio recalled. "But then another guy climbed up and said nope he's dead all right. And she went berserk."

Neighbors wanted Bigote to move away, they wanted to be rid of his nuisance, even if it meant parting with his musical talents. But they did not want him to die, not unanimously.

And his harsh departure left locals with a mixture of relief and guilt brought to a crescendo with the owl's removal. The dismantling of that over-sized hood ornament represented the end of an era. Which moved some to seek possession of the owl for nostalgia's sake, and otherwise.

Hernández, the owner of the building across the street, made a bid. "I offered \$20 for it. But his son wanted to keep it to remember him by. But then I got one at True Value for \$12," Hernández confided, explaining that his main interest was to spook pigeons from his property.

"It's going to be quieter around here, without a doubt." "He had children in New York he didn't get along with, a wife." "He's a grandfather." "He's a veteran." "He should have died sooner." "He used to help me walk my dog." "He never drank." "I never saw him with a can of beer in his hand." "He bragged about his whores." "That's his Porsche." "He killed two people; yea, he was on parole." "He was crazy and he had us crazy." "Nobody's perfect." "He used to lend me his radio."

The remarks spoken of Bigote after his death congealed into a collective judgment, offered callously, apologetically, candidly and with no lack of color. They reflected the impression of a man framed in the white-bordered archway over the balcony where he spent most of his time, presenting himself, however, vulgarly or not, before the world.

A young girl of chocolate complexion who lives directly across the street from Bigote's tiny studio apartment looked into the hovel. The shower curtain had been taken down and for the first time one could see inside.

There was a skinny old tattooed man in there, scouring the place with steel wool and ammonia. She could smell it from where she stood. She looked for a long time. Then she crossed herself solemnly and said: "He was a baaad man. But god bless him."

The owl was gone. Bigote's concerts had given way to the sounds of brushes scrubbing.