



Paint It Chantrea

by Juan Alvarado Valdivia

Diego stirred about his bedroom for a good long while trying to decide whether he should wear a long-sleeve button-down shirt that Jorani would probably like on him, or a t-shirt with a cartoon owl that said "Give a hoot. Don't pollute!" that her daughter, Chantrea, might think was cool. He figured she was the one that he had to win over. While he took turns putting the shirts on to look at himself in the mirror, it seemed like a crucial decision with vast potential ramifications. Once he chose the button-down shirt, the armpit areas were already damp.

When he knocked at Jorani's apartment, her nine-year-old daughter opened the door. Her straight black hair hung down her back. She had dark, penetrating eyes.

"Hi Chantrea," Diego said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said, holding the door for him. Chantrea closed it and darted to her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Jorani greeted him with a hug and a peck on the lips.

"You look nice," she said with her thick Khmer accent. She glanced at his pressed shirt, blue jeans and Oxford shoes. "You look like a young school teacher.

Diego blushed.

"You don't look too shabby yourself," he said. She wore a red blouse and tight-fitting jeans that showed her figure well. Diego

peered around the living room.

"Please, take a seat." Jorani led him to the dining table, which was already set. "Dinner's just about done."

He sat at the table. He gazed at the family portraits hanging on the wall. Before long, Jorani called her daughter to join them. She carried two plates of amok to the table. Each one held bowls made of large green leaves filled with steaming rice and a curry of diced fish and vegetables.

"Oh wow, this looks great," he said. "Can I help with anything?"

"Nope, you're our guest," Jorani said, bringing back one last plate with a smaller bowl, which she set at the head of the table. "Chantrea! Dinner's ready!"

Chantrea's bedroom door squeaked open. She marched to her chair and stared at her bowl.

"Thank you for having me over for dinner," Diego said. He took a bite and grinned. "This is really good, Jorani. I think I'll ask you for your recipe."

She nodded. Diego looked over at Chantrea. "So how was school today?" Diego asked.

"It was fine," she said, continuing to stare at her plate.

"Tomorrow's Friday. Are you looking forward to the weekend? Any plans with your mom?"

"Not that I know of. She's probably dropping me off at my aunt's house again."

Diego glanced across the table at Jorani. She wiped her mouth with a napkin.

"Chantrea, if you don't want to go over to Aunt Mealea's, you don't have to. I'm not trying to force you."

Chantrea stuffed a spoonful of rice and curry into her mouth. The three ate quietly.

"Do you have a favorite subject at school, Chantrea?" Diego asked.

Once she finished chewing her food, she glanced in his direction. "Science."

Without pause, Chantrea piled another spoonful into her

mouth.

“You like math too, right sweetie?” Jorani said. “She’s always getting the highest score in class.”

“That’s terrific. I’m not so bright when it comes to math but it’s important to be good at it. Do you think you’ll be a scientist like your mom when you grow up?”

“Maybe.”

The silence unsettled Diego. He could practically hear each of them chewing their food.

“Chantrea loves animals. She loves it when we’ve gone to the Oakland Zoo. Have you been there?”

“Yeah. Me and Oscar have gone there a couple times. Maybe we all can go sometime?” said Diego.

Jorani turned to her daughter. “We can take your cousin, Michelle, too.”

“Why are you saying my cousin, Michelle? I know she’s my cousin.”

“Sweetie, I am saying that for our guest, who has never met your cousin and doesn’t know her name.”

“Guest? He’s your boyfriend, Ma.”

Diego nearly choked on his food. He snatched his napkin to wipe his mouth.

“Chantrea, I know this is all new for you, too, but Diego and I are dating. He is not my boyfriend. Maybe someday he and I will decide if we would like that. But right now, we’re still trying to get to know each other.”

“Well, I can tell that’s what you want,” Chantrea said. She set her spoon down. “I’m not feeling hungry. Can I go to my room?”

Jorani sighed. “You’re excused. Remember, it’s your turn to do the dishes.”

With an icy silence, Chantrea took her bowl and placed it in the sink. She hastened over to her bedroom and shut the door. Jorani grimaced a smile at Diego. He nodded understandingly. They finished their dinner, struggling to converse freely. Although Chantrea’s door was closed, he felt like their conversation was being monitored.

Soon afterward, he hugged Jorani goodbye. He hung his head as he walked from her apartment. He was unsure if he should ever come back.

Diego met them at Bill E. Beaver's when he accompanied his nephew, Oscar, to a kid's birthday party. He was completing a perfect bonus round on *Galaga* when the unmistakable intro to The Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black" caught his attention. He whipped his head in the song's direction as a whirlwind of scamps dashed through the arcade. That's when he first saw Chantrea. Her back was to him, a toy guitar in her hands. Her shoulders were slumped with bored indifference as she hit each note, the *Guitar Hero* crowd cheering her on. She wore teeny black Chuck Taylors, jeans and a blue cardigan. How curious, he thought: what young girl in this text-message, Hannah Montana age would play that anguished 1966 song on *Guitar Hero*, let alone at a children's party?

When the kids and parental units were summoned to the dining room, Diego and Oscar strode in like victors. Oscar wore the Bill E. Beaver flip watch he and Diego had earned with all the tickets they won. He showed it off to his friends, including Chantrea. She laughed at the plastic whiskers that were used to flip it open.

"I'm sure a real rodent wouldn't appreciate that," she said. "You can mess up a cat's sense of balance by cutting their whiskers."

"Is that true, Uncle Diego?" Oscar said, peering up at him with a scrunched face.

"That's what I've heard," he said. He tried to hide a look of puzzlement as he wondered why a nine-year old would know that, let alone make that association from the plastic whiskers of a beaver-faced watch.

Diego followed Oscar and Chantrea over to a table where Jorani sat. She had a dark brown complexion, thin eyebrows and a fit build. He figured she must be his age—in her early thirties. He and Oscar took a seat across from them. They exchanged greetings.

"Is that your son?" she asked.

"No," Diego said, giving a chuckle. "I'm his uncle. Your

favorite uncle, right Oscar?" He nudged his nephew in the side with his elbow. Oscar flashed a missing-tooth smile.

"What do you do?" she asked him.

"I write grant proposals for a nonprofit that works toward bringing literacy to impoverished children. And I tutor some kids on the side. I used to be a teacher. How about you?"

"I work at the pathology lab for UCSF."

Inside, Diego had to fan and cool himself. He had a serious weakness for studious-nerdly types. Soon after, the aroma of melted cheese and pepperoni wafted in the air as a factory line of pizzas was brought into the room. In short time, Diego found out that Jorani was born and raised in Sihanoukville, a small beachside town in Cambodia. He was thrilled to tell her he had visited it four years before on a trip to Southeast Asia. He was surprised to find that her fellow Khmers reminded him of his South American family: warm, generous, laid-back, and adept at laughing away life's difficulties. As he told her this, Jorani smiled and tilted her head to the side, running her hand through her hair.

Diego noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. He had never gone out with a single mother. In fact, he had not dated much in the prior two years since he overcame a battle with leukemia. The last woman he had dated stopped returning his calls once he told her he was a recent survivor. He was damaged goods. And though it hurt to be dumped, he couldn't blame her. No one knew if he would get sick again.

As they ate their pizza, Oscar folded a prize ticket into a small triangle. He held it against the table with his index finger and reared back the middle finger in his right hand. Chantrea made two Ls with her hands as Oscar flicked the paper football twirling over it.

"Good one!" Diego said. He turned to Jorani. "I taught him how to do that."

After the kids finished playing paper football, Diego noticed how aloof Chantrea was compared to the other kids. Her eyes scanned the room while she took a sip from her cup, as if she was sizing them all up.

“Ray’s dad didn’t show up again,” Chantrea said to Oscar. “I’ve never seen him. I bet you his parents divorced and he’s just too embarrassed to tell anyone.”

Jorani became quiet after Chantrea said this.

A lanky teenage employee walked into the room. He held a big chocolate cake with one lit candle.

“Oh man, I’m stuffed,” Diego said, patting his belly.

“Me too,” Oscar said, mimicking his uncle’s tummy-patting. After they sang to the birthday boy, the smiley birthday cake entourage of Bill E. Beaver and Shelly Squirrel lumbered into the room. Each mascot held an assortment of balloons. “Billy! Billy!” the kids chanted before rushing over to them. Diego smirked as he watched them swarm the mascots like a cloud of locusts.

“Let’s go get a balloon,” Oscar said to Chantrea.

“What do you want a stupid balloon for?” she said.

Oscar hesitated, then scampered over to the mascots. Chantrea stared across the table at Diego as he conversed with her mother.

“I saw you playing *Paint It Black*,” Diego said to Chantrea. “I love that song.”

She crossed her arms. She stared at him with a yeah, so-what expression.

“Sweetie,” Jorani said, leaning toward her daughter, “It’s rude not to respond.”

Chantrea sighed.

“It’s a good song,” she said.

“Where did you get such good taste in music?” he asked her.

“My mom.”

“They play a lot of Stones in Cambodia,” Jorani said. “It was the only good thing that came out of that war—all that rock ‘n’ roll we got from the Americans.”

Diego smiled and nodded. Chantrea rolled her eyes. She ran off to join the kids.

Suddenly, the Bill E. Beaver mascot howled in pain just as a cluster of balloons floated to the ceiling. Giggling, Chantrea ran

past Jorani and Diego into the game room. They looked at each other with befuddlement. Oscar scurried over to their table.

“What happened?” Diego asked.

“Chantrea yelled ‘Human!’ and kicked Bill E. Beaver in the shin!”

“Chantrea!” Jorani said, stomping after her daughter.

Diego couldn’t help but laugh as the boys gathered around Bill E. Beaver and leapt to grab the balloons from his hand. The force is potent with Chantrea, he thought.

A few days after the disastrous date at Jorani’s apartment, Diego flipped through the *San Francisco Chronicle* at the home of his sister, Lorena. She packed Oscar’s lunchbox in the kitchen while he sat at their dining table. Oscar trotted around the living room holding a miniature jet at eye level. He made a whirring sound that increased in volume whenever he tilted the plane to make a turn around the leather couch.

“That’s strange,” Diego said aloud. “An eastern Pennsylvania man was charged with trespassing after he allegedly broke into a home, cut his hair, and prepared fried chicken before being discovered.”

He set the paper down as Oscar swooped around the couch with his arms out like a plane.

“Uncle Diego, what’s the meaning of life?” he said.

“Holy smokes, little partner. That’s a big question. Why do you ask?”

“Today at school Chantrea told me there isn’t one—that people make one up because they need to feel like they’re important.”

Diego tittered. He was not surprised that Chantrea—the girl who could probably play “Paint It Black” with the plastic guitar behind her head—had already figured that out.

“You wanna know what I think?”

“Yeah!”

“Diego,” Lorena said, her hands on her plump hips, her face

scrunched in the same frown she'd had since they were kids.

Diego leaned toward Oscar in a conspiratorial fashion.

"Well, I think your friend is right. But, I do think, while we're here on Planet Earth, that we should try to be happy without hurting others. Seems simple, huh?"

Oscar nodded.

"Just what other crazy things has Chantrea told you?" Lorena asked her son.

He tossed his plane up into the air and caught it.

"She told me her dad visits her in her sleep. She can't understand what he's saying because his voice is soft. And sometimes he carries his head around like the Headless Horseman! Pretty cool, huh?" Oscar said.

On their first one-on-one date, Diego and Jorani hit up the Ruby Room, a dark, cavernous bar by the lake. A hard rock song from Van Halen played from the jukebox as they sat at the bar. A few stools away, two hipsters drank cans of Hamm's.

"So how old were you when you had Chantrea?" Diego asked, nursing a beer.

"Oh, a crafty question. You're trying to figure out how old I am, huh?"

"Maybe I am."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I was twenty-three. Twenty-one when I got married to Chantrea's dad."

Diego was startled she had introduced the subject of Chantrea's father so willingly.

"And what was he like? How did you two meet?"

Jorani told him she met her husband, Nimol, at the university they attended in Phnom Penh. He was a brilliant mathematician who aspired to be a professor like his father. After her sister and her husband moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, Jorani and Nimol intended to follow them. America seemed like a land with bountiful opportunities. But more importantly, it was a land free of the ghosts and nightmares from their homeland, a country that was

still littered with landmines that killed and maimed people, including children who were born decades after the war.

“Nimol’s parents didn’t survive,” Jorani said. “Intellectuals like them were rounded up and killed after the Khmer Rouge took power. He was a child, just seven, when they found them. He never saw his parents again.”

She paused, stirring the straw in her screwdriver. Diego wondered why she kept referring to him in the past tense.

“They put him in a labor camp. He survived three years in those death camps. Can you imagine?”

Hanging his head, he took a sip from his beer. “Were you in the death camps? I’ve read about them. When I was in Phnom Penh, I went to the Killing Fields.”

“My family fled to Thailand right after the Khmer Rouge took power. We returned to Sihanoukville years after the Vietnamese overthrew them.”

Jorani stared off, stirring her drink again. “Nimol was a gentle person, but he had terrible mood swings. We thought he’d get better once we left Cambodia, but it got worse once we got here. He found this country to be cold. Neighbors hardly knew one another.”

“What happened to him?”

Jorani took a breath.

“He killed himself.”

“Oh, God.” Diego put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

They sat with a wall of silence between them.

“I don’t know why I told you. I just met you.” Jorani drank.

Diego looked at her with a morose expression. “I can only imagine how difficult that must be,” he said.

“Chantrea thinks her dad died from the war—which is essentially true, but—”

“That’s understandable. I don’t think that’s something you would want to tell a child that young.”

The two stared at the shelf full of bottles behind the bar. An 80s dance song played from the jukebox.

“Two years ago, I almost died,” Diego said. “I had leuke-

mia. I'm not telling you because it compares to what you've been through, but I figured I should tell you at some point and this seems as good of a time as any."

"But you're okay now?"

"So far, so good," he said, knocking on the bar counter. "My doctors don't consider me cured until I've gone five years without relapsing, so I've got three more years of crossing all my digits."

Jorani gave a faint smile. The dim red lighting softened her face.

"Well no wonder," she said.

"No wonder what?"

"No wonder I've trusted you with what I just said. You're different."

"I guess so. I have stared death in the face!"

Jorani held her drink up. They clinked their glasses. She stared into his eyes as she tipped her drink back.

"Chantrea doesn't seem to like me," Diego said.

Jorani laughed.

"She's like that with most people. It takes her a while to warm to anyone. Plus, she's not used to having a guy around. It's still new to her. I haven't dated in a few years. But this is new for you, too, right? Dating a single mother?"

"That's also true. But how did you know?"

"I can tell. I wasn't—as you Americans say—born yesterday."

After drinks, they strolled over to the lake. It was a good night for a walk—brisk but not chilly for a late winter evening. A nearly full moon hung in the sky. Side by side, Diego and Jorani stared at the watery reflection of the lights that circled the lake like a ribbon of phosphorescent stars. They sat on a bench to watch the moonlight twinkle on the lake. He reached out to her. Hand in hand, they watched a night heron fly off over the lake, over a thick-
et of trees as it cawed into the dark.

One night, Diego dreamt of Cambodia. It was dark. A full moon hovered over a misty field of rice paddies. The palm trees shim-

mered a milky glow. Like a film camera, he watched a young Khmer boy hiding amidst the rice stalks. The boy was covered in mud. It was Nimol. His eyes peeked over the stalks. A pair of yellow headlights from a transport truck pierced through the mist. Soldiers dressed in black with red scarves jumped out from the back of the truck. They barked at a group of blindfolded villagers, prodding them over to a ditch using the butt of their rifles. One of the soldiers instructed them to kneel.

The boy stared at a blindfolded woman. Her arms were skin and bone. A soldier stood behind her, holding a shovel over his shoulder. The villagers beside her quivered and murmured prayers to themselves. The soldier raised the shovel over his head. The boy buried his face in his hands. One by one, he heard the dull thud on their skulls, the sound of their bodies tumbling into the ditch.

The dream cut to a wide shot of the paddy. Diego found himself wading in shin-high water, his bare feet digging into the cold mud. The boy slogged through the rice stalks before he ran toward him. *No, no, no! They'll see us!* Diego tried to shout but couldn't just before the boy was propelled through the air after a landmine exploded. The boy screamed, splashing into the paddy's water. Diego dashed over to him. The soldiers spotted him and shouted. When Diego looked down at the boy, he had turned into Chantrea.

Diego called Jorani and she came over to his apartment for homemade *estofado de pollo*, a Peruvian dish he had learned to cook from his mother. Later, he treated Jorani and the kids to ice cream sundaes at Fenton's Creamery. Afterwards, they flicked and chased a Frisbee around the playground by the lake. This romp in the sun got Chantrea smiling; she seemed to delight in tossing the Frisbee out of Diego's reach so he had to chase it down. They lost themselves in play.

Afterwards, Diego and Oscar went to Jorani's for a movie night. Diego brought his copy of *Lilo and Stitch*. Chantrea laughed at Stitch's hair-brained antics and at Diego's ensuing boisterous laughter.

When the movie finished, Diego perfectly imitated Stitch's voice by saying "Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind." Chantrea laughed hard. "Can you do that again?" she asked, and Diego repeated the line in Stitch's voice. He grinned from ear to ear, incredulous that he had done something she actually liked.

The following week, Diego surprised Jorani by showing up to her apartment to give Chantrea his hardcover copy of *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Animal Life*. As he handed it to her, he explained that his parents had given it to him when he was a boy. He felt the book would be put to better use in her possession, especially since she loved animals. While Jorani stood beside her at the front door, Chantrea thanked him, struggling to hold the hefty 640-page book in her arms.

Later, Jorani spent the night at his apartment. After they made love for the first time, they lay naked together. A candle flickered by the bedside. She ran her hands through his hair. He kissed the top of her head as she nestled against his chest. He tucked his arm beneath her warm body, staring at the flickering dance of light on the ceiling.

"Can I show you something?" Jorani said.

"Sure."

She sat up to reach for her phone on his nightstand. With her back against the headboard, she thumbed through her phone, its white incandescent light beaming through the dark. She handed him the phone. He stared at a black and white photograph of a young Khmer man.

"That's Nimol," she said. He had a high forehead and solemn, narrow eyes. He wore a black blazer and tie. "This photo was taken for the university where we studied."

"He was handsome," Diego said. "Chantrea has his eyes."

Jorani made a faint grin. "Everyone in my family has said the same."

He handed back the phone. "Thank you for showing me his picture. It means a lot to me."

"I don't want to feel like I'm hiding him."

They lay back down in bed, turned toward the candle. He spooned her.

"I think he would have liked you," she said.

He kissed her shoulder and pressed closer to her. After a while, he mustered the courage to ask her a question he could not put to rest. "How did he kill himself?"

Jorani stared into the flame. "He hung himself."

They were silent for a long time.

One spring evening, Diego cycled over to Jorani's apartment. Chantrea greeted him at the door. He was going to cook them a vegetable curry. After exchanging kisses with Jorani, he realized he had forgotten to bring a container of cream. He asked her if she had any in the fridge. She didn't.

"Shoot," Diego said. "Is there a store nearby?"

"There's one three blocks over," Chantrea said.

"You wanna take him?" Jorani asked her.

To Diego's surprise, she agreed.

And so, Diego and Chantrea set out. She took alternately short and long strides to avoid stepping on cracks in the sidewalk. A black girl walked past them with a scraggly terrier. The dog's eyes were big like moons full of terror. The sun was beginning to set.

"Would you ever want a dog?" Diego asked.

"Yes."

"Like the one we just passed?"

"No. That dog looked like a wuss. I want a big dog. Like a German shepherd."

The neighborhood was quiet. They could hear their foot-steps on the sidewalk. In the distance, a hip-hop song blared from a car.

"Even though you don't know it, I think we have a lot in common," Diego said in a soft voice as he stared at his shoes. "My dad's dead, too. He had a heart attack when I was twenty."

Chantrea stared at the pavement.

"I know I'm not family, but I want you to know that I'm

here for you and your mom.”

A convenience store stood on the corner of a main drag. Diego held the front door open for her. She followed him to the coolers where he grabbed a carton of cream.

“You want anything?” he said as they passed the candy aisle.

“No thank you.”

Back on the residential streets, Chantrea continued to step over the cracks in the sidewalk.

“You really like my mom, huh?” she said, staring up at him.

Diego nodded as they stepped through a pool of streetlight.

“I do, but I also happen to think you’re pretty cool, too.”

“Why do you like us so much?”

He hesitated. “Because we’re all survivors,” he said. “Although your dad isn’t with us, you come from him—and he went through a lot to bring you into this world. Someday, when you’re older, you can read about what he went through.”

“I already know.”

Diego peered down at Chantrea. She stared ahead with a knowing gaze.

“And that’s what makes you different from all the other kids. It’s a curse and a blessing, but I think you already know that.”

Before long, they reached the apartment complex. He turned to look both ways before they crossed the street. Chantrea grabbed his hand. “Here. I know a shortcut,” she said.