

PROLOGUE

“Grampa, Grampa... please tell us a story.

Tell us about Ricardo.”



It was bedtime and the children had gobbled down their evening snacks, giggled through supervised tooth brushing – with Yael blowing little pink toothpaste bubbles – and now they were sitting up in his king-sized bed with its overstuffed pillows and deep blue comforter. “These are eight of the smartest and sweetest children in the world,” thought their grandfather.

The children loved sleeping over at their grampa's house. There were after dinner trips to Baskin Robbins for cookie dough, butter pecan or even bubble gum ice cream. He made up all sorts of fun games – like “monster tag” – and planned elaborate scavenger hunts for their excitement. Grampa quizzed them with word games and math problems, constantly trying to encourage yet challenge them just a little.

“How much is $5+6+11-11$, David?”

After some quick math, David would shout, “11!”

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“How do you do that so fast?” asked Grampa, and the seven-year-old would shrug his shoulders and smile broadly, feeling very pleased with himself.

Grampa taught his grandchildren songs from the old days, like “Down by the Old Mill Stream” and the Lake View High School fight song. The children especially liked the ending, “Cha he, cha ha...” But mostly, Grampa told them stories. He spun stories of Native American spirits rising from the smoke of Wisconsin campfires, stories of meetings in Chicago with Casper and Spooky, two very friendly ghosts, and stories of the adventures of young princes and princesses from England, Spain and Russia with names like Edward, Isabella and Anastasia. The children learned about the importance of education, honor, family and love. They loved to hear his stories, but most of all, they loved the adventures of Ricardo.

“All right, Michal, settle down. Rachel, I’ll tell the story if you promise to go to sleep right afterward,” Grampa said softly as he gently patted the heads of his two eldest granddaughters, while wondering who enjoyed this ritual

more, the children or him.

“Grampa,” asked Shira, her eyes open wide with excitement from knowing they had won ... and savvy enough to recognize now was the time to negotiate her best deal. “Can you start in the beginning, back in Spain in the 1300s?”

“Please, Gumpa,” cooed Rachel using her favorite nickname for him. “We’ll be here a whole week this time. If you tell us five or six chapters each night, you could finish the whole story before we have to leave. Please, Gumpa.”

“What do you think, Lev?” Grampa asked. “Would you like to hear the adventures of Ricardo too?”

Lev nodded his head in agreement and his blonde hair bounced just a bit. Lev didn’t like to waste words, but for a three-year-old he certainly shook his head a lot.

“Ok, here goes,” Grampa began.

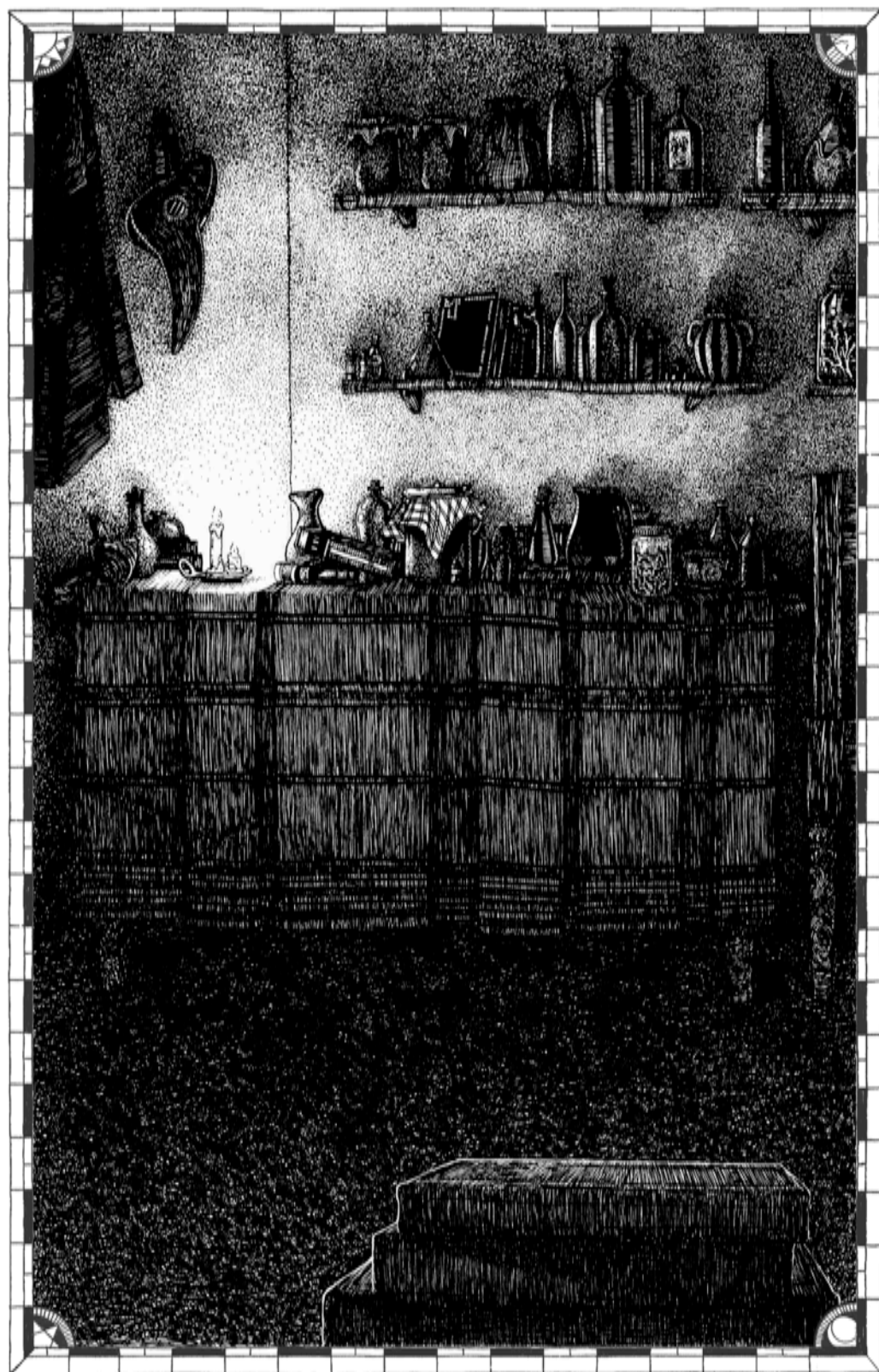
All eight children with Aviva and Esther, the two youngest grandchildren in the middle, laid back beneath the covers, closed their eyes and snuggled together comfortably while waiting for their grandfather’s story.

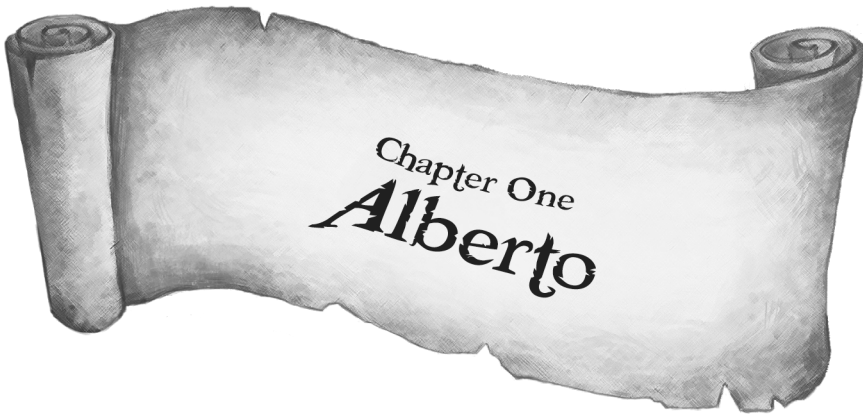
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“Like a beautiful painting!” Grampa thought to himself.

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FAMILY





he leeches attached themselves to the cuts the barber made in the pus-filled sores on Alberto's groin, chest and neck, and right before Ricardo's eyes, they grew fat with blood. This leeching process was intended to suck out *cosas malas*, or the poison, but instead it sucked the very life out of his father. Ricardo poured salt on the fattened leaches, which immediately fell away. After the treatment, it took Alberto nearly a week to regain enough strength just to wash and care for himself. Returning to work at the *farmacia* was simply out of the question.

Alberto was one of the millions of people in Europe suffering from this horrible, debilitating disease, which included sores, vomiting blood and a high fever. The doctor

had informed Ricardo that this disease was called the plague, and while its cause was still unknown, there were several credible theories. He said that the plague could be attributed to “pockets of bad air; the unfavorable alignment of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars; and agents of the Devil poisoning the wells.”

Ricardo later learned that the plague originated in Central Asia and was carried on merchant ships to Europe by fleas on the backs of rats and cats. The plague, also appropriately known as the *Black Death*, killed half of the people it infected, which was one-third of the total population of Europe at the time. The disease had already devastated so many families, and the Columbos were no exception.

Life had been especially hard for Ricardo Columbo's family over these past two years. Since his father became ill with the plague, things were certainly different.

Each member of the family tried to help. His mother, Marta, after a full day of teaching at the Bilbao School, began tutoring students in their homes to help make ends meet.

Marta's specialty was languages, in particular French, Hebrew and Latin, which seemed to attract the children of the wealthy families in Madrid. The extra money was not enough to make up for her husband's lost wages, so one evening she came home from tutoring with a basket of laundry on her head. She placed it on the floor, looked at her family and softly explained, "One has got to do what one has got to do." Marta proceeded to scrub each piece of clothing with determination. It was hard for Alberto to see his wife make such a sacrifice, but he was too weak to protest.

It was also hard for Ricardo. His mind switched back to a better time. He recalled the last time the family went out together for a fun evening at the theater. How he had loved that night! Alberto, Marta, Ricardo, his younger sister Anna, and his little brother Esteban were dressed in their finest clothes. Mother made a feast of baked bread, honey, spinach and even a brisket of beef. After they blew out the candles and left the house, they went to the *confiteria* sweet shop, where Ricardo, Anna and Esteban each chose a small bag of candies to munch on in the theater.

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The play featured a boy who traveled the world to seek adventure. He battled pirates, saved a town from flooding, rode elephants in India, and fell in love with a beautiful princess. The boy had kept a journal, which he read to the audience. Ricardo left the theater with an acorn of an idea that grew into a strong oak in a matter of days. He would strike out on his own great adventure. He was fourteen years old, and certain that he was ready. In a few years, he would return home with knowledge and riches that would make him famous and his family proud. This dream was shared by many young men, but experienced by few. Ricardo currently was in his third year of a pharmacy apprenticeship, and his father had a vision that one day he and Ricardo would own their own neighborhood farmacia. He even had the name picked out: Columbo Family Farmacia.

For as long as Ricardo could remember, every Sunday morning, his father would take him to the countryside to search for plants, roots, leaves, and bark with medicinal value. "These are for diarrhea, this bark will make a child vomit if they drink poison, and these leaves, when ground

into a mortar with alcohol, will stop dizziness,” Ricardo’s father had patiently explained. Ricardo liked learning about the different plants, but most of all he enjoyed being alone with his father. It was their special time together, without brothers or sisters, adult discussions about money, or uninvited neighbors. It was just Alberto and Ricardo, the future proprietors of Columbo Family Farmacia.

But these days, the theater and the Sunday outings were distant memories. Three weeks after their theatre excursion, Ricardo’s father fell ill. First there was a rash, then sores over most of Alberto’s body, followed by vomiting and a high fever. Ricardo stayed home from school and from the farmacia to care for his father. He learned to soak sheets and towels in cool water, wring out the excess, and then wrap them carefully around his father’s burning body. “Do this to fight the fever. If you can keep him cool, your father has a chance to live,” explained the doctor wearily, as he had witnessed so many cases of the plague lately.

So, every waking hour of every day for nearly a month, Ricardo battled with the plague. It was not a glorious battle.

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There were no swords and shields glistening in the sunlight nor mighty steeds flying into a hoard of plundering Tartars from the North. But it was a battle just the same, and an intense and serious one at that. Ricardo's battle was fought with wet sheets, soaked towels and love. Eventually, the fever broke. His father's body was weak and ravaged by the disease, but Ricardo had won. His father would live!

To help repay the mounting family debt, Ricardo took a second job, this one in the La Latina Community Hospital. Ricardo got up every morning at four, washed, ate some bread with jam, and arrived at the hospital promptly before sunrise. When the chief nurse originally hired Ricardo, she explained that he would be a nurse's aide. The title made him feel that he would be a key member of the medical staff. His work was indeed valuable, but it was work that no one else wanted to do. Cleaning bedpans, emptying spit buckets and washing sheets covered with vomit was not exactly everyone's idea of satisfying work. Yet, somehow, Ricardo didn't mind, and within a few days he felt comfortable working in the hospital. Soon he was cleaning not only bedpans, but sores,

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cuts and wounds as well. The doctors and nurses liked Ricardo, and more importantly, the patients liked him. Señorita Cordoza would not let anyone else feed her, and Señor Marco waited patiently for Ricardo to give him his morning bath. "He has the touch of an angel, a gift," the Señor proclaimed one day after Ricardo massaged his sore back.

On many occasions, though he was quite tired, Ricardo would sit with a sick or dying patient and do what he did best: he would listen. Ricardo was a good listener.

Ricardo's life was very full. First, there was the hospital early each morning, followed by school, then the farmacia. The apprenticeship position had him busy until dark, as he was obligated to close up every night. Ricardo's mother kept dinner warm for him, though lately it was mostly rice and beans. He struggled to keep his eyes open for his homework, then fell exhausted into bed.

"Thank you for this, my son," Marta said as she took Ricardo's hard-earned pesos, wrapped them in her handkerchief, and carefully tied a ribbon around the bundle

like a little present. Then, she placed the precious sum into her savings jar, which she hid in the pantry. Secretly, Ricardo wanted to save some of the coins for his future travels, but he saw how his mother patched Esteban and Anna's clothes and how they seemed to eat only beans and rice. Finally, when the landlord put them out of their lovely little house for being late with the rent, he simply gave every single peso to his mother.

Following their eviction, the Columbos moved to a two-room flat in a poorer section of Madrid. It was depressing at first, but when Marta took the family's bright-colored quilts and hung them on the walls, lit candles, and sang songs in her melodic voice, their rooms became a home.

Even with the sadness of the move, added responsibilities, and his father's s weakened condition, Ricardo could not stop dreaming about his great adventure. He fantasized about sailing in a huge ship to Africa, discovering diamonds, freeing the slaves in the mines, and coming back to Madrid with his pockets bulging with precious stones. He dreamed he would buy the entire run-

down neighborhood, demolish it, and rebuild it with beautiful homes, schools and parks. In the middle of all of this would be the Columbo family estate. "A young boy's dream," Ricardo thought wistfully, but he was torn. "How can I leave my family when they still need me?" Yet, he rationalized that there would be one less mouth to feed. "The truth is," he reasoned, "I'll never find success here." Ricardo wondered about where he might go, when he could leave, and most of all, how he would tell his family. He finally came to this conclusion: "I will wait for a sign. Something will signal me and give me the answer."

One morning, after Ricardo had emptied his last bedpan, he walked through the ward that the nurses called "death's front porch," because it held the sickest patients, and very few ever left there alive. He stopped to sit with a young girl who had fallen into the river a week earlier and had not yet regained consciousness. She was likely an orphan, Ricardo thought, since no one ever came to visit her. Ricardo took the girl's hand and spoke softly into her ear, reassuring his silent audience that she would recover and be dancing and

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singing again. In fact, he felt certain that once she recovered, she would start on the path to becoming a famous actress or ballerina. The nameless girl lay with her eyes closed, never moving, barely breathing it seemed. But Ricardo felt she heard him, and once he was certain he saw a slight smile appear on her angelic face.