

THE HANGING OF MIGUEL DELGADO

Barbara Yost

To be fair, Miguel Delgado was killed by that which he loved, and his family would say for years that it was the way he would have wanted it. But, of course, what Miguel would have wanted was to live longer and better. His family devised a way to comfort themselves with the thought of divine providence or the will of the man or of cruel fate, whatever they could grab on to, to reduce the pain to a whisper. *He's gone*, it whispered, *and the pain has no end.*

Accept it. Life dares you. The desert never asked to be loved.

§

Palm trees are not native to southern Arizona. Like immigrants, they have been transplanted to live among the scrub of this land, where their trunks grow tall and their roots grow deep. The desert is not a sea of sand but a broad landscape of aspirant vegetation that fights for life, reaching greedily

for droplets of water, sipping sparingly, and hoarding moisture when the rains finally come in the season of the monsoons.

The town of Santa Bonita was founded two centuries ago by Spanish missionaries. Monks arrived to convert the natives, who pretended to believe but came only for the wine and agreed to believe whatever faith was the price of admission. It is today little more than a spot on the desert bearing homes of brick and wood and adobe, a church bleached by the sun, and 5,000 people of many colors. Some prosper, some struggle as much as the scrub, stretching for opportunity as the plants stretch for water. The palm trees also reside here, planted in clusters that line streets and rise from the lawns of green yards and brown ones. The trees form their own community. They give their surroundings dignity and a sense of permanence, bending in the wind but never breaking.

For three generations, the family of Miguel Delgado has been caretaker of the palms. Old Javier Delgado worked in his father's Mexican bakery until he was 14, when men returned from the war and took back the jobs they had abandoned. Javier's father came home with a limp but two strong arms. He shooed his wife away from the ovens and sent his son to learn the palm trade, how to shinny up the stalk wearing spikes on his boots, holding a blade in his

teeth, head bare, coarse hands ungloved, pulling himself higher and higher until he reached the canopy of fronds, a green fright wig at the top of a 25-foot pole. He was a narrow boy, sinewy, but he had long legs that wrapped around the trunk and he had arms muscular from lifting racks of *pan dulce* and empanadas and pig-shaped gingerbread cookies.

When he was 20, Javier announced he was starting his own company. He employed three men. After five years, one of these men opened his own company and he employed three men. Javier hired a replacement and then there were just enough men to serve all the palm trees of Santa Bonita, to trim and style their coiffures and nip the grasses that grew at their feet. Javier's company worked the east side of town, Manny Carmona's the west.

Javier married at 31. Engracia, a small, round woman with a Hollywood smile, gave birth to two girls and then a boy, named Angel because he was premature and the size of a grapefruit but lived. Time and again they went to the doctor and waited for hours to be seen for the poor condition of Angel's lungs, crowded into the waiting room where other children sneezed and sniffled and scratched at rashes and cried for the indignity of being ill, and their mothers cried with them. Money leaked through their fingers, but Angel's lungs grew strong, and his lusty cries testified to their vigor.

Engracia nursed Angel for a year, to give him a good start. When Angel was 14, Javier taught him to love palm trees.

“See how they reach toward heaven,” Javier said, pointing a stub finger cut short by a saw. “If you look up from the ground, they seem to rise higher than the clouds. At the top, they spray like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Stand beneath them, and you have an umbrella that gives you shade.”

“Yes, and when the fronds dry out they turn into wood and when they fall they can kill a man like a log coming down,” Angel said, not yet in love. But that would come.

Angel was more sensible than Javier. He wore a hat when he climbed and leather gloves that gripped the trunks that looked like the rough legs of an elephant. Javier climbed in short pants, Angel in jeans tucked into his boots. He wore shirts with long sleeves to protect his skin from the insects that made their homes in the tops of the trees and burrowed deep into the bark, the small brown scorpions, the crusty cockroaches, and the borer beetles.

Javier laughed to see him suit up for the day. His own skin was tanned the color of a walnut, his hands thick and calloused, legs scarred from the

bite of the bark and the blade that sometimes nicked when he swung it in an arc across a stubborn leaf. He teased his son.

“You aren’t going to war. You don’t need armor. If you love the tree, it will love you back.”

But he knew that Angel’s birth had been a miracle, and in his heart he was glad the boy took care. Engracia insisted on it. She bought him the hat and the thickest pants she could find. She sent her men off each morning with a prayer tucked into their lunch pails. Javier invited her to come along and watch them work. She couldn’t bear to watch her boy and also her husband defy gravity and join the birds at such heights. At night, she prayed that Angel would not fall in love with palm trees and would take a job on the ground, perhaps in a bakery like his grandfather or a shop like his sisters.

Prayers were no use. By 16, Angel was love struck. He woke up one morning so eager to work that he forgot to eat breakfast until Engracia called him back, made him sit and eat scrambled eggs with bacon and chilies.

The tree that he was in love with was an eager lover. With his father laughing from below, Angel climbed fast, his legs pumping to carry him into the crown, cutting away old dead fronds before they could interlock and form a half-ton frond ring that could slip and crush a man or asphyxiate him

with dust and rat guano. Angel buried his face in the leaves, inhaling their fragrance, fingering the strings that peeled away from the fronds, plucking the loose petioles and tossing them down to his father. He pruned like a surgeon, cutting only the fronds that drooped, never those that reached upward and had robust life in them. When his work was done, and his father was nearly buried in fronds, Angel leaned back to admire his work, the emerald leaves fanned like the rays of sun that dappled through them and made shadow puppets on the lawn.

He looked down to see Mrs. Whitman peering from her living room window observing the job the Delgado family was doing on her landscaping. When he caught her eye, she disappeared behind the curtains. Mrs. Whitman never paid a Delgado in person. She left two twenty-dollar bills in an envelope on a bench on the front porch, attached to the arm with a little piece of tape and *Tree Trimmer* written on the front. Javier Delgado had been grooming her palm trees since 1963, but she always called him the Tree Trimmer, never Javier or Mr. Delgado or Señor Delgado. Mrs. Whitman did not speak Spanish, and so she would not pronounce, “Señor.” “Tree Trimmer” was easy, and that’s what he was, after all.

Angel was love struck again when he met Brisa Ayala. She was 18, he was 19, and he thought she was as beautiful as a palm tree in full flower. They married at the mission that had become a church with cracks plastered over and whitewashed to the color of a dove. Javier's first grandson was born a year later, and Brisa allowed the grandfather to name the baby. He chose Miguel because that had been his father's name. Babies named for family members would grow up lucky, he told them.

Such a handsome boy, Engracia was given to saying. His eyes and hair were the color of strong coffee, and a faint light shone in them like the color of cream. When Miguel was born, he slipped quickly from his cocoon but left a trail of blood. For three days, Angel thought he would lose Brisa, but she healed, losing only her ability to have another child. Engracia held her as they both grieved as only women can grieve for the promise of babies lost, and she told her daughter-in-law that Miguel was such a beautiful child, what did she need with more? They both prayed that he would become a baker like his namesake and make his living on the ground instead of in the air where only the birds belonged.

Even the power of two prayers was not enough to keep Miguel Delgado from following his father and his grandfather into the community of

the palms. His love was there from the beginning. On Palm Sunday, it was little Miguel who gathered and prepared leaves to bring to the church for each parishioner. His fingers were nimble, and he wove leaves into mats for his mother and his grandmother, and into hats for children. They wore them to school and put them on their heads when they played outside at recess, shading their faces. He made hats for his teachers and purses for the secretaries, who exclaimed they were more beautiful than the purses in the department stores in the big city.

At 10, Miguel begged to climb the trees and hold a knife, but Engracia and Brisa stood firm. Not until he was 16, they insisted, and their wishes were respected. Miguel stomped his foot and crossed his arms in a pout but stayed on the ground stacking the fronds that fell from Javier's and Angel's blades. He played with pole saws and scabbards until Brisa took them away. He craned his little neck to see the trees that reached heavenward and soared above the clouds – that much higher because he was that much smaller.

§

It was on a Friday night that Javier went out for a six-pack of Dos Equis and did not come back. Javier and his son liked to sit on Javier's porch during the evenings, Miguel sleeping inside as they drank beer with their wives and

listened to the desert, the grunt of the javelinas and the scream of the bobcats. When it rained, they smelled creosote and mesquite. When it was dry, they watched tumbling yellow clouds from dust storms that swept across the land 8,000 feet high and fifteen miles wide. The storms flushed jackrabbits and quail and roadrunners from their hiding places. When the dust came, Javier drank more beer to quench his thirst.

By 9 o'clock, Engracia was near panic.

"He's dead," she told Angel. "He's had an accident. A coyote has him. He's had a heart attack and lies on the desert. Drug runners have killed him and burned his body."

Engracia had quarreled with Javier just before he went out. The argument was a silly one, and her guilt ran deep.

"He probably met Manny or Jose," Angel told her, swallowing his own fear, but it stuck in his throat and made his voice sound uncertain. "He stopped at the church for Bingo. The truck ran out of gas and he walked to the station. He'll be home soon. He's strong. He can take care of himself. He'll call if there's trouble."

The call came at 10. It was the sheriff's office. An officer had spotted Javier buying beer at the Circle K. He asked if Javier had papers proving he was an American citizen.

"What papers?" Javier replied, raising a coarse hand in anger and pointing a gnarled finger bent at the tip as if it were a pistol. "My family has lived in Arizona since 1847. We don't need papers. Where are *your* papers?"

The officer didn't like his attitude and said he had grounds to arrest him. And so he did, leaving Javier's truck parked at the Circle K with no time to lock it up. Javier was detained for two hours before he was allowed to call Engracia. He had no lawyer. Angel took the phone.

"Keep your cool," he told his father. "I'm coming down to the jail. Don't say anything that will get you into more trouble."

Sheriff Bob's jail was a spartan one. The walls were gray and smelled damp. Mostly, it was full, full of men that officers rounded up for sport. Once in a while they got lucky. A man spoke no English, had no papers, smelled like chilies, betrayed fear. Sheriff Bob had a van that knew its own way to the border and back because it had made so many trips to deport the unwelcome, flying past bottles of water left for those desperate enough to cross the desert under cover of darkness, desperate enough to risk baking in

the summer sun, going crazy from thirst and heat, all for want of a job and a means to support their families. Good Samaritans risked arrest themselves to leave water jugs along the path. Sheriff Bob's officers collected them and poured the water into the dirt. No need to make it easy for illegal aliens. Aliens. As if they hailed from Mars.

Javier Delgado, who had no papers, was just another bounty, a Martian landed.

"Find my driver's license," he told Angel.

Angel, Manny, and Jose marched up the steps of the jail feeling outrage and defiance. But the door to the jail was a magic portal that stripped them of their courage and self-esteem as they passed through. On the other side, they fell weak in front of the brown uniforms and sneers of the officers.

Manny and Jose urged Angel forward.

"You're holding my father," he said and managed to push fear down his throat like a bitter pill. "He's legal. He just forgot his driver's license." He held out the plastic license that showed a smiling Javier Delgado against a red, white, and blue American flag and a red, blue, and yellow Arizona flag. His hair was slicked and combed. His mustache neatly trimmed. The man in the photograph had no reason to be afraid. His family had come to the

Arizona territory in 1847, when a name like Delgado was as common as the desert stones.

The officer took the license and scrutinized it long enough to memorize the information there. His prisoner's height, weight, hair and eye color, organ donor, sex, date of birth 11/07/1937, his home on the west side of Santa Bonita. Officer Jim handed the ID back to Angel, a dirty thumb print left in one corner.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Angel Delgado. He's my father," Angel said.

"So, Ahn-hell," Officer Jim repeated, expelling the Spanish pronunciation of the name as if it were an evil spirit. "We can hold your father for 48 hours before we notify Border Patrol to check him out. But I'm going to let him go this time with only a warning to carry his driver's license or a passport at all times. If he has papers, life is that much easier for all of us."

Javier Delgado had never been out of the United States. What did he need with a passport in his own country? Why should he carry documents like a cur wears a tag before it is picked up by the dogcatcher?

“Yes, sir,” Angel said, and the bitterness of the pill in his throat sent up a lick of fire. “Thank you, sir. It won’t happen again.”

“And next time you come by, bring some tamales from the mamacita.”

Angel smiled and nodded. “I’ll be sure to do that, officer.”

His throat burned.

Officer Jim went into the back and returned with Javier, whose hands were still in metal handcuffs. Officer Jim unlocked the cuffs and threw them onto his desk. “Next time, bring your license, señor.”

As they passed through the door of the jail, Angel, Manny, and Jose, who had been so small inside, grew tall again, and their anger made them thick with injury. They sputtered and talked of retribution, but Javier held out his arm.

“It is what it is,” he said. “I’m unharmed. I lost nothing except the beer they confiscated, which they are probably drinking at this moment. No one can take your self-respect unless you give it away.”

Angel believed Javier had grown taller in jail.

Engracia wept as she hugged Javier and apologized over and over for what she had said to him earlier, though they had both forgotten what it was. The men and their wives sat on the porch and drank the Dos Equis they

had purchased when they picked up Javier's truck. From his grandfather's room, little Miguel heard the conversation and wished he were sitting at the top of a palm tree where everything was cool and safe.

The incident was dismissed, though it was never forgotten. Three knives and a good, strong, broken-in harness had been stolen from Javier's truck.

§

On the day Miguel turned 16, he wanted no party, no cake, no piñata for the children to smack until it exploded with candy.

"That's for babies," he said. He didn't say that what he wanted was to play kissing games with girls. That would be a sweeter treat.

But he agreed to open his presents at breakfast, and there it was wrapped in red paper – the shiny new scabbard his grandfather had given him. He grasped it like a scepter and he felt like a prince – the prince of palms.

Brisa made him finish eating before she let them take him away and show him how to shinny up the trunk of a tree, spikes on his boots, knife in his teeth. Brisa insisted he wear gloves and a helmet and wrap himself in the new leather harness that fit around his legs and held him against the palm tree. It did not fit as snugly as the one Javier had lost to thievery, and it was

smoother and slicker. But Javier tugged it tight as the boy began inching up the trunk of the palm tree.

“Slowly now,” Javier called.

Javier and Angel watched as Miguel climbed higher and higher effortlessly, spikes giving him traction, arms already strong enough to lift his weight. And then all they could see was his boots as Miguel Delgado reached the top of a 45-foot palm tree for the first time and wondered if he had flown there. The morning was clear and bright, with only a few wispy clouds. His house was not so far that he couldn't pick out his own roof. The dome atop the mission rose above its neighbors, a white facade streaked with soot. Cars on the ground looked like toys. Miguel had never been in an airplane, but he couldn't imagine it would be any more magnificent than this. He felt at home, as if he were part of the tree. Shouts from below shook him from his reverie.

“Just clip a few of the fronds, then come down,” he father was calling.

“You need to get used to being so high. Don't get dizzy.”

Dizzy? Miguel felt he could reach up and shake the hand of God.

He took the blade from his teeth and whisked it across a petiole. Javier had warned him not to watch the leaves fall, but he couldn't resist twisting round and following it with his eyes as it floated to the ground.

Javier shook his fist. "Don't look down," he shouted. "Sit up straight."

Miguel laughed. He swiped the new blade across a frond, once, twice, again, and it was released. This time he obeyed and heard it land on Mrs. Whitman's lawn. He cut two more and heard them rustle as his father stacked them in a pile.

"That's enough for now," Angel called. "Come down slowly."

But Miguel had not yet had enough of the heady experience of living at the top of a tree. He felt lighter than air. A hawk flew by and he reached out to grab its wing. Stretching too far, he fell back a little as the hawk cawed a warning. He heard gasps from below. Laughing, Miguel threw a cocky salute and regained his hold on the tree. The palm tree would always protect him, like a father protects his son. The crown of the tree felt like a cradle, never to rock, never to fall.

"Now!" Angel called again and meant business.

Inch by inch, Miguel descended until he jumped onto Mrs. Whitman's lawn. He saw her watching from her front window, shaking her head.

“This is not a game,” Javier shouted in his face, grabbing the front of his shirt. “You don’t look down, you don’t lean, you don’t catch birds. Do you hear me, Miguel? Or you’ll never climb another palm tree again.”

Exhilaration immunized Miguel from shame. “Yes, sir,” he said, but he felt no remorse. He had flown with the hawks.

§

Within two years, Miguel had bested his father and his grandfather. He could climb faster, trim faster, prune the crown of the tallest tree so that only the healthiest fronds were left and formed lace that made perfectly symmetrical shadow patterns on every yard with palm trees on the west side of Santa Bonita. Unlike them, he made it his business to meet the homeowners, and they liked this young Miguel Delgado, this personable young man with a Hollywood smile. Only Mrs. Whitman stayed inside and paid him with a check tucked into an envelope marked *Tree Trimmer*. When he noticed her watching, he waved, whether it was from the top of a palm or the bottom, and laughed to see her quickly pull the curtains closed.

Sometimes Angel saw a sheriff’s car cruise slowly by, eying Miguel as he dropped fronds into his father’s arms. Angel nodded, and the officer quickly

turned his head and cruised on down the street. Once it was Officer Jim and Angel did not wave.

§

Old Javier Delgado decided to retire from tree trimming. Miguel had passed him in skill, so he told Angel to take over and hire two more men to work the south side of the west side. At 18, Miguel was the best and taught the new men all he had learned and how to do it fast in order to serve more trees. Miguel was fast at climbing, but then he took his time trimming the old dried fronds once he reached the canopy. The view from a height where the hawks flew, eying him from the side of their heads and diving in for a closer look, was intoxicating. From his perch, sitting secure inside his harness, he could see the whole of Santa Bonita, its red tile roofs and roofs of slate and shingles, the green yards and the brown ones covered in cactus and succulents that looked like spiders. He saw sheriff's helicopters chasing those running from the border and radioing their locations if they ducked down an alley or jumped the fence into a backyard.

On a clear day, if he looked hard enough and imagined hard enough, he could almost see the tower of the university in the city. If he squinted and held his breath, he could almost see his dream coming true. As much as

Miguel loved palm trees, he loved the idea of going to college more. He would graduate from high school in a few months, and what were his chances of earning tuition and studying for four years so that he had choices beyond tree trimming? Whether he stood on the ground or sat at the top of a palm, the view was far.

Angel and Brisa shared his dream.

“We just don’t have the money,” Angel told him as Miguel sat at the kitchen table doing his homework. “I didn’t go to college, and I ache for that. If we had any means...”

One of Angel’s sisters, Mary, was a secretary and had no children. Olivia had two children she also hoped to send to college. Between the lot of them, there was not enough for one child’s tuition, let alone three, and Miguel knew his cousins wanted an education as much as he did and had worked hard in their mother’s shop, yet all fell short of the thousands for tuition, which might have been millions and been no less attainable than a hundred.

“Something will happen, Miguel,” Brisa told him. “If not now, then we’ll keep trying. You children will all go to college. I didn’t almost bleed to death for you just to see you trim palm trees the rest of your life.”

Angel looked hard at her, and she blushed.

“It’s given us a good living,” he reminded her.

“I know,” and the touch of her hand soothed him. “I just want more for Miguel. Olivia wants more for her twins. Next year, Miguel. Next year the university will welcome a Delgado.”

§

“You need a scholarship,” Miguel’s chemistry teacher told him when he shared his dream. “You’re bright,” she said, “and you work hard. You volunteer at the church and at the retirement home visiting with the old folks. I’m sure you would qualify. You write well and could ace the essay portion. But the deadline to apply for next school year has passed. Keep up your work over the summer, and come see me in July. I’ll help you get in.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Carrillo,” he said. “I forgot to bring you an apple today.”

“Bring me a diploma from the university,” she said. “That’s my prize.”

Old Javier had not graduated from high school, but he sat in the front row when Miguel and his two cousins crossed the stage in caps and gowns at Santa Bonita High School, the same stage where he had watched his son graduate 22 years earlier. He was old now and cried easily, so the tears fell as

he hugged Miguel and then the twins and then Miguel again and then the girls again.

“No one is prouder,” he insisted, though Engracias, Angel, and Brisa begged to differ. “We’re all proud of all of you,” he conceded.

The Monday after graduation, Miguel was back in the treetops. He looked to see the tower of the university, but the sky was hazy. Because one of his employees was sick, Angel was working in another part of town and left Miguel to work alone at Mrs. Whitman’s with a warning not to play tricks and not to reach out for birds.

“Wear your helmet, your harness, your gloves,” he said.

Miguel promised.

Many dead fronds hung at the crown of the tree in an impenetrable ring. Miguel first took out the petioles and then drew his blade across the first brown frond. He heard a soft sound, felt a rustle. Removing his gloves and putting them into his front pocket, he parted the leaves and looked down to find a bird’s nest chirping with two baby hawks. Two beaks opened and waited for Miguel to vomit mouse and rabbit meat into their gullets.

“I’m sure your mama is coming,” Miguel promised and folded the fronds back over the chicks’ hiding place.

He reached for his gloves and thought he could probably trim around the nest without disturbing the babies. Madrecita had other plans. With an ear-splitting screech and with talons splayed and reaching forward, a hawk came at Miguel, fire in her eyes, blood on her beak, drawn by the call of her chicks. She dove for his face. Miguel threw his arm over his eyes to protect them from being gouged. Next time, he would wear goggles, he told himself. He tried to push the hawk away with his hand, fearful he would injure her with his blade, until he could climb down and leave her to her nest. She circled and dove again with more speed, sinking her talons into Miguel's shoulder. He screamed in pain and swatted at her, no longer fearing he would hurt her and only fearing she would claw him. With his scabbard, he swung at her in a wide arc, hoping to take just the tip of her wing and send her off while he scrambled down. She flew behind him and he leaned to reach her. As he leaned, he felt the harness, which was smoother and slicker than the good old one that been stolen from Javier's truck, slipped down the trunk. Miguel began to slide out of the harness. The hawk dove again, and he dodged her attack, losing his helmet. As he slipped farther from the harness, Miguel lost his grip on the tree and swung backwards. His head, heavy with

dreams, slammed against the woody trunk. Blood trickled from his ears. The hawk sat on her nest and preened.

Mrs. Whitman was watching. She watched as Miguel's body twitched and then hung still, one foot caught in the harness by its spike, his blood dripping down the side of her palm tree. His arms hung free. His hand released his blade into the pile of fronds below.

Slowly opening her front door with one small pale hand, Mrs. Whitman stepped onto the porch. For a moment, she regarded Miguel hanging from her palm tree and then taped an envelope to her bench marked *Tree Trimmer*.

Two hours passed before Angel came by for Miguel and found him hanging by his boot. He ran from his truck screaming and the hawk at the top of the tree flew away. Within minutes, Javier was there and together they pulled Miguel from his harness, his body lighter now because his dreams had left him, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bulging, and laid him on the lawn where the men wept against each other. Mrs. Whitman looked out and then closed her curtains. The enveloped flapped on the bench but it was still there when her tree trimmers took the boy away.

At night, after an ambulance had come for Miguel's body, Angel returned to Mrs. Whitman's yard. He saw an eye peering from behind the curtains. The eye watched as the tree trimmer took an axe to her palm and struck it again and again until its wounds bit deep and the hawk was screeching, wings protecting her nest. Angel collapsed on the ground. Mrs. Whitman slipped out of her front door and retrieved the envelope taped to the bench. The porch light went out.

§

There was a memorial service at Miguel's school. Sheriff Bob was there and stood for photographs taken by reporters. Officer Jim was there, holding his head in the palms of his hands. A priest from the mission delivered a eulogy.

Manny and Jose held up old Javier by his arms as he and Engracia left the auditorium. His legs bent and twisted as they dragged him away, too sad to walk.

The principal of Miguel's school came to Olivia and put his arms around her small shoulders.

"My heart breaks for your loss," he said.

Olivia stared at him, empty, and turned to go. The principal pulled her back and handed her an envelope. Inside was a notice that a full four-year scholarship in Miguel's name would be awarded to each of her daughters when they enrolled at the university. There was no name inside the envelope. Olivia looked at the principal.

"I don't know," he said.

Olivia felt faint, but the principal caught her as she fell.

§

Angel drove by the palm tree in the front of Mrs. Whitman's yard. It had been a month since Miguel gave his life there. The people of Santa Bonita, from the east and the west, had put flowers around the trunk of the tree that was beginning to mend itself and scar over the anger Angel had left with his ax. A photograph of Miguel was tucked into one of the bouquets. Notes were taped to the trunk. We'll miss you. God be with you. Angel saw that the gashes in the tree spelled mercy. He stood over the flowers, bowing his head.

An eye peered from the window. Angel waved and drove on to the next tree.

Barbara Yost was a newspaper feature writer for many years and now works as a freelance newspaper, magazine, and fiction writer. She has a degree in English and Journalism from the University of Iowa, a master's degree in English from Arizona State University, and an MFA in creative writing from Arizona State.