

## Rock and Light

“Ah, pinche viejitos mentirosos,” declared my tio Pedro, as he made himself comfortable by leaning back into the kitchen chair and running his sun-kissed hands through his silvery-brown hair; finally resting said hands on the top of his head, ready to regale us with one of his stories. My brother and I chuckled as we settled in for the evening, imitating our favorite uncle by placing our hands on the top of our heads, eager to listen, while our parents smiled, and then arranged appetizers on the kitchen table in preparation for the long night ahead.

“When I was your age, I listened to the stories the old guys recounted and every time I would think, pinche viejitos mentirosos; of course I never said that, since I was polite, but I thought it,” reiterated my tio, as he shook his head and grinned. “There was just no way all those things could happen to someone!”

Yes, that was my tio Pedro. Every year, when we were growing up, he would visit us, spending the month of May between our house and my tio Chico’s. We all looked forward to May and his visits, not only to see him and to feel the warmth of his presence, but also to hear his exciting and magical stories that captivated us. He brought so much joy and laughter that even last week, years since his passing, my brother, cousins, and I had the late night giggles thinking about him.

Indeed, my tio Pedro was a unique individual. His mannerisms, expressions, and general comportment have become familial characteristics. To this day, any tangent in a conversation has to begin with his catch phrase, “ah, pero para esto” with the right index finger raised, so as to alert listeners of the upcoming digression.

So please, come and join us at our table. Make yourself comfortable, perhaps by placing your hands on the top of your head, so I can introduce you to my tio. Let me share with you one of his many stories. I promise it will only be one story. Well, maybe two interwoven stories, but definitely no more than that.

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Cock-a-doodle-doo, a cock crowed in the distance. Cock-a-doodle-doo, the rooster called again. This was Pedro’s favorite way to awaken. This simple song transported him to so many far away locations; occasions filled with happy memories: the 4,000 islands region of Laos, his grandfather’s farm in central Mexico, and to the ranch where he grew up in southern California. Pedro had actually been awake for hours; it was another restless night. He had been lying in bed, with his eyes closed, wishing himself to sleep, telling himself he was asleep; but he wasn’t.

The rooster cried once more. Pedro loved his call; it let him know that he wasn’t the only one awake. Morning was near. Soon it would be acceptable to get up and go about the day. Pedro had always been a poor sleeper, but ever since Elena left him, he hardly slept. His body was expiring from weariness and lack of sleep; he just wanted to pretend to be

dead to the world, to close his eyes, and just maybe, his body would get the rest it so desperately needed.

Who was Elena you ask? Elena was Pedro's soul mate, his partner in crime. They were always together. They met years earlier when Pedro was hired to analyze data from an HIV grant that Elena was coordinating. Their offices faced each other and every free moment led to extensive conversations, reconnecting twin souls on what they had missed in the current iteration of their lives. Casual acquaintances could never guess that for very different reasons, they enjoyed the same things, as their strengths complemented each other seamlessly. In reality they were complete opposites, while remaining true to the definitions of their names: Elena was the light of Pedro's life, "la luz de mi vida" he would say, due of her gaiety, while for Elena, Pedro was her rock, owing to his stability. More than anything else though, they loved to jet set anywhere and everywhere the moment they had free time.

Pedro loved adventure. He was keen on traveling and exploring exotic lands. Anything new or different made him feel alive. He was dumbfounded the first time he laid eyes on the Grand Canyon; its magnificence was otherworldly. He cried when at sunrise, rising from the misty jungle, he witnessed the splendor of Angkor Wat. He ran himself ragged, becoming dehydrated, investigating every ancient place of worship across Cappadocia; but it was Elena that made his heart skip a beat.

Elena treasured learning and getting to know different peoples and cultures. She reveled in the pleasure of watching the world go by while sipping mint tea in a Moroccan café or hiking for days in the Amazonian jungle eager to interact with indigenous villagers. Elena taught Pedro that there was just as much delight in the journey as in the destination.

Today though, would be Pedro's first escapade without Elena. He needed to find inner peace. His world had unraveled. He wanted to look forward to something, to catch a glimpse of joy and find a ray of his former self. He longed beyond hope that an excursion could revitalize him, and he knew just the destination, or so he at least hoped: a recently discovered cave in the selva Lacandona--an area he had first visited as a teenager many years ago. This was just the trip he needed to clear his head, and besides, he knew Elena would not have liked this jaunt because she would have been claustrophobic.

Pedro arrived to the cavern by early morning. Intertwined vines and bushy trees obscured the entrance to the active cave, and only a few yards from the entryway, the cave rapidly descended about a hundred feet below the surface. The locals were familiar with the cave's opening, yet in spite of this, they had not ventured beyond the initial drop. This seemed a little puzzling, since the task at hand did not seem particularly challenging, but Pedro did not give this any additional thought.

Pedro did know though, that Elena would not have approved. She was always well versed with all her options, typically consuming vast amounts of information so that the moment they arrived to any locale, she immediately knew all the sites and happenings. She would have researched all there was to know about this cave and spoken to all the well-informed

inhabitants to find out why more exploration had not been done. One of her strengths was to dig deeper and ask the important follow-up questions; this was not one of Pedro's strong suits.

Pedro was eager to descend into the earth; nevertheless duty demanded that he first needed to survey the situation. His initial plan was to lower himself into the fissure and then he would be better able to decide on the next steps. He rappelled down to the bedrock, as was his goal. He then flicked on his lighter to determine oxygen and carbon dioxide levels. There was a nice strong flame, indicating that the air quality was suitable.

He traversed a short way over boulders and mud filled puddles, zigzagging his way as he tried to advance following various potential passages, until he entered a cavernous chamber. His torch, illuminating to its capacity, was unable to fully expose the cavity, as the magnitude of the space was unreal. Formations dotted the hall. The arrangements of stalactites and stalagmites created grand structures--columns, an organ, cascading pools, and numerous translucent tapestries with pleated configurations of various shapes and patterns. And the colors; oh the colors were breathtaking, including an array of whites, reds, and turquoise. The cavern was magnificent!

For a second time, Pedro used his lighter to check for high levels of carbon dioxide, as there was now a slight musty smell, although not dank as of yet. There was also some visible evidence of decomposing bat guano and rotting vegetation, but the flame from the lighter once more came back strong, yet again suggesting that the air quality was not a problem.

He probably should have gone back to his home base then, so that there would be an accurate account of his exact plan and location, however his excitement for this bold undertaking was such that he decided to do a little more exploring. After all, he had brought along all the necessary equipment he would need for this expedition, so there was no real reason to head back and wait until tomorrow, other than of course to better inform his surface contact.

Beyond the formations were various passageways that led to who knows where. There was so much to discover. Pedro rushed about taking in the wonders of this place. He scampered to the northwest corner of the chamber, where fine needle-like crystals grew in radiating clusters. He then headed east toward the largest of the pools, which contained an extraordinary display of cave coral and in the shallows, cave pearls could be found.

Hours went by, and yet it felt like only mere minutes. The running around was beginning to take a toll and exhaustion was starting to set in. Pedro knew that he should leave the cave, but he couldn't--there was so much to admire and take in.

As he studied the sights, Pedro unexpectedly found himself up on a ledge, where a bat flew by his face, startling him. This slight reaction initiated a series of unfortunate events. First he slipped on the smooth dripstone, causing him to topple over and hit his head against a crag, thereby shattering his headlamp, while his handheld flashlight flew out of

his grasp and smashed into a pillar, breaking his trusty guide. Pedro then crashed onto the earth, crushing his lighter in the process. This left him lying on the ground, knocked out cold in complete and utter darkness.

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Ah, pero para esto, nine years earlier, the night before the Great Saunter, a thirty-two mile walk around the entire perimeter of Manhattan, Elena convinced Pedro to participate in the event. The next day, they jumped out of bed, took the subway to South Street Seaport, registered, and started walking. They were not prepared, they did not train, nor did they bring food or water, so they wasted time and energy going into bodegas to obtain the sustenance they needed as they hiked.

They quickly strolled up the Upper West Side, surpassing many of the other walkers. Having reached the halfway point at the northern tip of Manhattan, they had a leisurely lunch, while watching a baseball game at Inwood Hill Park. This was their crucial mistake, as Pedro's legs began to cramp up and his muscles tightened. He hobbled his way down the Upper East Side and a short while later, his hamstrings completely gave out. The last few miles Pedro could only managed to shuffle his feet, before bowing out at mile twenty-eight; Elena could have kept going but she adjourned with her companion.

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Some time later, our so-called main protagonist came to. Nothing was broken; he himself was only bruised and a little sore, but otherwise he was fine. On the other hand his headlamp, flashlight, and lighter were not, as they were rendered useless due to the fall.

The cavern was pitch black. Pedro could not see a thing, not even when he placed his hand directly in front of his face. How was he going to get out? He tried to recall where exactly he was in the chamber; from which direction he entered. If he crawled around, would something feel familiar? Had he first gone to the large pool and then to the organ-like formation, or was it the other way around? It was then that he first noticed the dull pain pulsating his temples. He let out a sigh, closed his eyes, and put his left hand to his forehead. What had he gotten himself into?

Pedro's thoughts wandered towards Elena. She was crazy. Yes, he was the one that liked to take risks, but once they had achieved their goal, he was happy with their accomplishment, while she needed to push him out of his comfort zone just a little bit, to keep him on his toes and not let him get too comfortable. Maybe it was her way of getting back at him for treading dangerously on the edge.

While in this black hole, ruminating about his partner, Pedro's senses came together to detect a slight breeze. He opened his eyes and felt the puff of air again. A light wind was coming from his right side, and if he was not mistaken, there was a sound as well. He wasn't one hundred percent sure what he was hearing. Was it the howling of wind? Was it the flowing of water? He had not seen water before he entered the cave, but the locals

had warned him of an underground river that over the years had swept away various residents.

Pedro thought about his options and decided that his best bet was to follow the flow of air. He jumped to his feet and took a couple of steps in the direction of the draft, which was not as noticeable at this height, before bumping his head into a stalactite. His eyes could not adjust to the complete darkness of the abyss. He got down on his hands and knees, and guiding himself by touch, he began to crawl in the direction of the air current.

He crawled for hours. Pedro knew he was not advancing much, but he felt hope in that the breeze and the as yet unidentifiable sound were getting stronger. His knees and the palms of his hands were raw from the constant friction, yet he persisted until in the distance he saw something.

There seemed to be a dot of light, a strange glow. As he approached, the dot grew into a ray; it was some type of luminescence. After a few more yards he was able to see enough of his surroundings so that he began to walk slowly toward the illumination. Pedro was very excited considering that this could potentially be a way out of the cavern. As he rounded the corner, finally having a direct view of the light, he entered a grotto that was illuminated by stars--the stars however were radiating diamonds!

There were gems of every shape, size, and color. Pedro sat down to contemplate the radiance. He felt an energy producing sensation from the glimmering diamonds, maybe a state of nirvana. Out of the blue it seemed as though all his troubles had left him. He lay down and closed his eyes. Pedro felt joy, and he was happy--he was really, really happy; a sensation he had not experienced in a very long time.

Miniscule particles fluttered about. There was no rhyme or reason to the dancing of these twinkling spirits. Some sailed downward, others floated upward, there were certain ones that hovered in place, while several coasted from side-to-side, and then there were even a handful that performed loop-de-loops.

This place reminded Pedro of Elena. He could sense her presence--he felt so at home. He missed her so much. Yes, he had countless memories of her and hundreds of pictures, but he wanted, no, he needed to hear her voice. How he missed that sweet, beautiful, familiar voice. "Focus." Yes, that is what he needed to do. Almost instantly he could see himself exiting the cave, while guided by the most perfect diamond.

Pedro opened his eyes and turned his gaze in the direction he knew he needed to look. There, in an almost hidden nook in the firmament, was his North Star, his diamond--the light of his life! Pedro, with mouth agape, contemplated the precious stone, which was surrounded by a rainbow colored halo, created by the light refracted off the neighboring crystals.

Pedro knew this was what he had been searching for all his life. He was sure of it. And in an inexplicable way, it seemed as though the diamond was calling for him. Pedro began

to climb the rock face so he could reach the jewel, but after scaling a few feet, he slipped and fell. He tried again, and again he tumbled, but on the third attempt he succeeded in reaching the diamond.

With astonishing ease Pedro was able to extract the gem from the igneous rock. He then quickly descended, with the diamond in tow. Surprisingly the diamond was hot and it seemed to move, but of course this was caused by his excitement--his imagination was just getting the best of him. As Pedro left the room of diamonds, the grotto dimmed, but his treasure continued to emanate brilliance.

Following the increasing wind and guided by the light given off by the diamond, Pedro was able to better navigate the labyrinth. As he approached what turned out to be the final bend, the sun's blinding rays greeted him. Everything was bright white and he could not see. He closed his eyes and realized that the previously unidentifiable sound was water; he was surrounded by it. Once his eyes became accustomed to the glaring sunlight, he noticed that directly in front of him a wall of boulders separated the cave from a thunderous river. He also observed that a few yards from where he stood, another set of large rocks forced the river to dive underground, therefore in order to exit the cave, he would need to somehow ford the large channel of water before getting swept underneath the rocks.

Pedro placed the diamond in his backpack and manipulated his rope to create a lasso, which he used to snare a boulder on the opposite bank of the river. He then tied the other end of the line to himself before attempting to cross the waterway. As he waded, the taut rope burned his skin as he flailed in the water, but eventually, half-drowned, he was able to make his way across the roaring torrent. Having reached dry land, Pedro gasped for air. His legs crumbled beneath him. He tried to lift himself off the ground, but his arms could not raise his torso. Collapsed from exhaustion, Pedro slept for a short while to regain his strength.

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Ah, pero para esto, ten months earlier was the weekend of the Great Saunter. Pedro and Elena were now older, slower, and heavier, but they decided to confront their old nemesis. They trained for weeks by going on hikes with differing degrees of difficulty and distance. And even though they were unable to make it to New York City for the actual event, they mapped out a thirty-two mile course in the lakes region of New Hampshire, with considerable more elevation.

This time they were well prepared with the necessary supplies and equipment, including Elena's lucky orange US Open baseball cap, a gift from Pedro. They started walking slowly, but were consistent. Two-thirds of the way through the route, they were fairly confident they would be able to walk the thirty-two miles, unless if something unexpected occurred.

It was rather uneventful really. No fist-pumping celebration. No battle to the finish with a thirty-two mile monster. In the end it was just a casual twelve hour stroll between soul mates, taking in the sights: the lakes, houses, winding roads, hills, valleys, streams, ponds, and horse ranches. Walking thirty-two miles never seemed easier.

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Upon awaking, Pedro immediately made his way to the nearest hospital, to make sure that his time in the cave did not engender any ill effects. Throughout the journey, warm feelings of love enveloped him. He pondered how the diamond not only appeared to be leading him, but also how it felt as though both he and the diamond were feeding off each other, as the gemstone seemed to grow hotter and pulsated with stronger vibrations that he could feel through his backpack.

In stark contrast to the cave, the hospital was bitterly cold and seemed utterly bleak. After describing his ordeal to the doctor, she began a physical examination. Pedro removed his backpack and placed it on the floor. He then clumsily took off his shirt and braced himself for the icy stethoscope. His breathing slowed and became shallow. He began to shiver uncontrollably and his speech became slurred. The doctor looked very puzzled when she failed to perceive a heartbeat. As she tried again to detect a pulse, Pedro suddenly crumpled onto the floor. The doctor and her team tried to revive him by performing CPR and using a defibrillator, they then immediately transported Pedro to an operating room.

In the midst of open-heart surgery, the surgeon discovered that all the arteries and veins were in good working order, but the actual organ itself, with its chambers, walls, and conductive system, was old and shriveled; very much in a state of decomposition, as if Pedro's heart had wasted away.

The doctors were perplexed. They had no way of explaining what they were witnessing. This just didn't make any sense. He seemed fine when he first walked into the hospital. He had just been through such an incredible adventure! How was someone with a heart in such poor condition even alive? Did the cave gravely impact Pedro's heart?

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After such an epic march, Pedro assumed they would go home, shower, eat, and call it a night; Elena though had other plans. She wanted to say hello to the lake and take a quick dip to soak her blistered feet in its cooling waters. The days were long this time of year consequently, Elena asked Pedro to pickup a couple of pizzas from the Pine Cone Café, that was just a few miles down the road, so they could have a celebratory picnic on the lake shore.

As Pedro drove away, Elena phoned in the order, a meat lover's pizza for him and a peppers and onions pizza for her. A few minutes later, Pedro arrived at the restaurant,

however the early-summer crowds had descended and the eatery was buzzing; it would be another forty-five minutes until their order was ready.

Just as nine years earlier, Pedro's legs tightened, and he had a noticeable limp as he got out of the car and walked toward where he had left Elena. The beach was unusually quiet, deserted even, with not a soul about. The sun, inching closer toward sunset, sparkled on the crystal clear, calm water. The reflections of the pine trees and clouds created exact replicas of themselves on the water's surface. The lake was absolutely stunning--picture perfect. It was then that Pedro noticed the faded orange baseball hat bobbing in the water--the hat that never left her side.

*What happened next is a blur. My tio Pedro was never able to describe this part of the story. He said he had no memory of anything that happened after he saw the baseball cap.*

Some time later, as first responders pulled away, Pedro looked in the rearview mirror and did not recognize the old, withered, defeated boxer, with cast-down eyes and rounded shoulders that lay in front of him. His head was going to explode; he took the deepest breath of his life, which was all he could do to keep himself from bawling uncontrollably. The sun was setting, tears were falling, and dreams floated away.

A week later, at her wake, Pedro concluded his eulogy by emphasizing: "Elena had a wonderful life, full of many incredible adventures, which took pause when she passed away. This is not the end. Now is the time for her to rest, heal, recover, and prepare herself to begin a new chapter. The sun will rise again, one-day joy will fill our hearts, clouds will float on by, and we will emerge from the shadows."

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Just then, a nurse ran into the operating room, yelling at the top of her lungs that a beating heart was inside Pedro's backpack. Bewildered, the doctors looked at Pedro's unresponsive body. Why was there a heart inside the backpack? Could this enigmatic heart save Pedro's life?

Wasting no time, the surgeon prepared the heart for the surgical intervention and then performed the transplant, attaching the life-saving organ to where the rottenness had been. Little did the doctors know that the diamond, Pedro's light in the dark--the light of his life, had metamorphosed itself into his heart!

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No, no, you are mistaken; this is not a sad story. This is an anecdote of hope, and a narrative of soul mates rekindling their love. In fact, my tio Pedro claimed that on the day of his successful heart transplant, he and Elena were once again reunited; and that the operation allowed my tia Elena to resume where she belonged--impregnating his soul and sharing in their life's journey.

You see, every aspect of my tio's life was a story, full of adventure and wonder--I think that was just the way he saw the world. He was someone that sensed, or maybe just elected to focus on phenomena that most of us miss or take for granted.

Was he prone to exaggeration? Maybe, but whenever I've asked my dad if an account was true, he would nod his head and agree that that was pretty much the way it happened.

My tio Pedro was a truly happy person who spoke of Elena often, as if she was still with us: I think that for him, she was. I don't know which parts of this story are true. My tio did have a heart transplant after exploring a cave, and my dad says that after the surgical procedure my tio Pedro did transform himself into the light-hearted person I know and love--maybe that really was Elena's influence in some way. Unfortunately I never had the pleasure of meeting my tia. I wish I had--she must have been truly magnificent to enrich a character larger than life. On the other hand, maybe I have come to know my tia through my tio's actions and demeanor, and in this way, they both continue to live in our hearts and brighten our lives.