

JULIAN FALCONI

LITTLE LIGHTS

*“If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold,
it would be a merrier world.”*

— J.R.R. Tolkien

For mom and dad with love.

THE LOPEZ BROTHERS had rougher hands than most kids. The white of their fingernails was seldom unaccompanied by dirt, the stretches of skin between their knuckles were coated by small nicks, scabs, scars, and bruises, and, if they weren't especially thorough with their scrubbing, their palms would smell of whatever kind of animal they handled last — although they were among few who could effectively distinguish between them. Today, their hands smelled of fish and tadpoles.

“This one we should sell for 25 cents,” said Diego, pointing at a silver fish in a bucket — singling it out by the two streaks of highlighter yellow gleaming across its body. He and his brother were pricing their Sunday afternoon's catch; for a month now, they'd been secretly selling them at school to buy themselves ice-cream on Tuesdays.

“What do you think, Nico?” he said.

Nico stumbled out of the bathroom in nothing but his brother's old Buzz Lightyear underpants and, with a sluggish face-plant, introduced the mud stains on his forehead to his bed. After struggling to breathe into his sheets, he rolled onto his back and caught his breath.

“That fish is the reason I'm practically naked!” he declared at the ceiling. “Let's sell it for 50 cents, that way I get to keep an extra quarter for my sacrifice — maybe we can surprise mom and get her an ice-cream this week too!”

Diego chuckled and stood up, keeping his gaze on the tattered bucket. “Alright then, prices are set. Tadpoles and fish with one streak sell for 15 cents and *this* beautiful bastard for 50 cents,” — he turned to face Nico — “Andrea's coming over for a math lesson with mom soon, so I'm off to shower. You should probably do the same,” he said, raising his eyebrows toward his younger brother's dusty silhouette, “judging by that mess on your bed.”

“Shit...”

“Yeah, mom won’t be too happy about that. I’ll use her bathroom so you can get ready too,” said Diego and left the room.

Once alone, Nico turned his attention to the soiled quilt and decided to deal with it after a hot, but quick shower.

Within an hour, both kids were dirt-free and back in clean soccer shorts and t-shirts, Nico had fixed the dirt issue by flipping his quilt, and Andrea had started to realize how marbles and mathematics could be related.

“So if there’s 12 marbles for 3 kids, we’d have to give each kid 4 marbles!” exclaimed Andrea, turning her back on the little circles and stick figures she’d drawn on the blackboard. Her greyish-brown hair spun around as she pivoted, revealing the half of her neck it usually covered, then swayed back into place when she stopped. She eagerly looked to Ms. Lopez, who was sitting at Diego’s desk, for a final seal of approval.

“Exactly, dear! Now, let’s run through some practice problems. And, remember, don’t be afraid to ask your teacher for extra paper to draw out the problems — that’s how I used to do it when I was your age. Eventually, you won’t need to anymore,” said Ms. Lopez as she cleared the blackboard. She was two digits into writing out the next problem when Diego walked into the room.

“Diego! Care to join us? It’s my first time in your house!” said Andrea.

“No thanks. Nico and I are building a Lego skyscraper! We’re trying to get it to scrape the ceiling.”

“It’s not fair that you get to play while *I’m* doing math. I don’t know why, but I thought you’d be a better host,” — Andrea slipped a mischievous grin at Diego.

“I’m not the one that needs the extra help,” he retorted and smirked at her fading grin.

Andrea was frowning now and evidently annoyed. “You suck. Not everyone’s lucky enough to just *get* math like you. It’s like you caught it!

You know... like the flu or diarrhea. Why couldn't you just *get* diarrhea instead?"

Ms. Lopez, who was about to intervene with a firm "*Diego, stop bothering her. I raised you better than that!*" quickly realized that this 9-year old girl did not need any rescuing. Instead, she opted to mediate, half afraid and half curious of what both kids might come up with to come out on top. "It's still early! We can finish these practice problems and then you can play too, Andrea. You can also stay over for dinner if you want. Want me to check with your parents?"

"That sounds great! If it's not a bother, I would love to stay. Thanks, Ceci!" said Andrea with a smile. She turned to Diego, hesitated with a short breath, and went on, "I'm sorry. You *know* how hard math is for me, it's like throwing raw spaghetti at the wall — *nothing* sticks! But your mom is great, I'm actually getting it now. Go play, I'll join you guys soon!"

"Well, with your permission," said Diego with a bow and left the room, taking with him the stool that held the door open. As he walked away, he knew Andrea was wearing her blank, yet perceivably annoyed — *you're an idiot, so I'm not acknowledging what you just said* — face. He knew it well and always felt complimented by it, like an Olympian that, on top of winning a gold medal, set a new world record. However, as he turned to face the hallway leading to the living room, his smile radiated a more reserved happiness at the thought of Andrea staying for longer. At the living room, he found Nico charging head-first into their half-finished ceiling-scraper.

"*Nico!*" Diego exclaimed. But, it was too late. Plastic bricks of all colors rained down onto the living room floor as Nico lay laughing hysterically on the sofa, which he had strategically placed behind the tower as a landing zone. "You couldn't wait *five minutes?! It's* going to take us another hour to reach the ceiling now," said Diego, disheartened and knotting his fingers over his head.

“We don’t need to! We just build half of it again and you get to tackle it down! Twice the fun, half the work — getting it to touch the ceiling would have been a pain in the ass. What’s the point of building so high anyways?”

“*Damn...*” Diego thought, “*the kid’s got a point,*” then laughed as he offered his left arm to his brother in agreement — “Your 7-year old wisdom never ceases to amaze me.”

Nico took his brother’s hand and they started building, once again, from the ground up.

Andrea didn’t know Diego lived in the countryside, and now, as she practiced division on his blackboard, she wondered what else she didn’t know about him. Her curiosity had deepened when the GPS led her and her father out of the city and introduced, for the first time, the rubber of their car’s tires to the dirt roads of rural Riobamba. She marveled at the towering trees that blanketed the mountainside, lowered her window to fill her lungs with their scent — it reminded her of her favorite Eucalyptus shampoo —, and relished in the thought of holding one of those snowy green leaves against her nose. She thought of home and how these autumn days would soon be spreading a patchy quilt of amber and maroon over Boston. Then, her chest ached when she thought of sitting by the Charles river with her friends. It reminded her that she hadn’t been able to become specially close to anyone since she’d moved here — Diego had become one of her closest friends and even they hadn’t spent much time together outside of school. Like her, he was generally quiet, but he liked practicing his English with her and was always happy to help her with her Spanish, especially with curse words; for some reason, he was much more capable at cursing than the other kids at school.

Whenever Ms. Lopez wasn’t focused on her, Andrea glanced around to see what she could learn from Diego’s room. The simplicity of it all stood out the most — the walls were empty besides the blackboard and the only

crowded spaces in the room were his bookshelf and desk. She saw all sorts of origami figures, a complete set of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and a Pikachu that must have been sewn and re-sewn at least a dozen times into its present state. She heard the chime of a phone ringing from Ms. Lopez's pocket.

"I'm sorry, Andrea. This is the second time Ms. Alvarado calls — I'm going to step outside and take this call. You're doing great. When you finish those last two problems on the board — if you don't have any questions — you can go ahead and go play with the boys," she said and left the room.

Andrea grew confident that, with a little effort, she could work out the divisions on the board. But, by now, she was tired of thinking in math and just wanted to go play. After checking to make sure Ms. Lopez wasn't nearby, she tippy toed across the room and opened the door slightly.

"*Dieeeego!*" She whispered through the hallway. And again — "*Dieeeego!*" — when she didn't get a response.

The corners of her lips shot up toward her ears when she saw him approaching with a confused, but curious expression on his face.

"What's up?" he said in a hushed tone, slowly opening the door to his room.

"Can you give me the last two answers, *please*? I'm *so* bored."

Diego laughed, then replied "Yeah, I got you. But you should try and actually memorize your multiplication tables. I see from your drawings that you get the concept, but knowing those tables is gonna make it easier."

"Why multiplication? We're dividing."

"Division is like the opposite of multiplication. I'm not really sure how to explain it, but it's made it a lot easier on me. For example," — he analyzed the first problem written down in her notebook:

"If we were to give 3 kids 4 marbles each — so, 3 times 4 — we'd have 12 marbles in total. Here, we divide 12 marbles among 3 kids and give 4

to each as the answer. See, they're connected," said Diego and turned to find Andrea looking back at him blankly.

"Alright, I'll trust you. Now, can you stop lecturing me and just give me the last two answers?" she asked.

Diego skimmed the last two problems on the board and said "Number 9 is 6 and the last one is 4."

"You're the best! I like your room by the way. You should read Narnia in English though, I've heard it's better."

Diego's eyes dropped to his feet before he was able to mold his lips into a smile and answer. "Well, I got those from my older brother, so I don't really have a choice. Besides, my English isn't great yet. I had a lot of fun reading them, maybe I'll read them in English when I'm older." He smiled at her — she smiled back. After a short pause, he added "I found Nico trying to read the first one last week, I'm excited to talk about it with him when he gets through it."

"You think he'll be able to?"

"He's smart enough and we've got a dictionary for any words he doesn't know. Sitting still will be his biggest challenge," he paused and chuckled, "Anyway, let's go see what he's up to."

They were walking down the hallway when Ms. Lopez called Diego from her bedroom.

"*Que pasa, mami?*" Diego asked his mom after making his way to her room. He edged the door shut behind his back as he waited for an answer.

"Nothing, *mijito*. How come you haven't told me about the field trip next Monday?" she said, with a tender curiosity in her eyes.

Diego wasn't expecting the question and wasn't ready to give his mom the answer, but she found it in his eyes when they sought help from his feet.

“Baby,” she said “I know we’ve been struggling lately, but we are okay. Next time, please tell me. If we can’t afford something, I will let you know — okay?”

“Okay.”

“Also, Ms. Alvarado just told me that she found a tadpole growing hind legs in a cup hidden in Sebastian’s underwear drawer — and that Mr. Perez called her to complain about extra fish in his aquarium. She’s not going to tell on you, but if someone complains to the school you kids might be in trouble. I suggest you let your catches go this time around until things quiet down a bit.”

Diego couldn’t help but chuckle. “Alright mom, thanks for the heads up — we’ll get on that.”

He felt his heart ache as he left the room. He believed in his mother, but was more aware of their economic struggle than she knew. He’d noticed they had only one worker helping gather the crops, overheard his mom asking his aunt for help when Nico had to see the doctor for a fever, seen her secretly wipe away tears through a crack in her doorway when he got up to pee in the middle of the night, and missed the ice-cream she used to buy them on Tuesdays.

It had been almost four years since his father passed, he was five then. They struggled at first, but his mother’s hard work and careful money management ensured that they never lacked anything they needed. They were lucky enough that, before passing, their father had saved enough money to help their mom purchase the acre of land they lived in now from their *patrón*. She planted and harvested lettuce and cabbage, the produce that grew most efficiently on their land, then sold it at the market. Unfortunately, both vegetables ran a relatively small profit margin. Nonetheless, it had always been enough to support their frugal lifestyle. Their mother had always insisted they didn’t need much and instead saved and invested whatever money they had leftover on enrolling them in a

private school from an early age — in Ecuador, a significant improvement from public institutions.

For about two years now, the agricultural market had become increasingly unstable with more competition entering the market and causing unpredictable inflation rates; it wasn't long before a spell of bad luck cut in half the selling price of lettuce and cabbage and crippled their income. Quite swiftly, it started showing in their daily lives. In spite of that, they were happy. Something about their little bit of land kept his heart beating to a sweet and familiar tune he'd carried since he was a toddler. He'd felt it fade every now and then when he felt their struggle, but sooner or later managed to find it again by the river, riding Heineken, picking fruit, or just hanging out with Nico, who seemed to have a similar way of moving to that same music.

Their house wasn't very big, so it didn't take Diego long to overhear Nico and Andrea talking in the kitchen.

"What are you guys up to?" he chimed in.

"Andrea has *never* tried *pan de yuca*! I couldn't believe it, so I told her she had to help me make some. You know... because mom doesn't let me be in the kitchen alone since the popcorn incident."

"Yeah," Diego laughed, "that was funny."

"Popcorn incident?" popped in Andrea.

"He tried to make popcorn in the oven."

Andrea laughed.

"Who leaves a 7-year old home alone?" said Nico.

"Nico, we were gone for 15 minutes. Anyway, we have to return the fish and tadpoles to the *acequia* — it looks like parents are starting to find them around our costumer's houses."

"I *told* you it was a bad idea," said Andrea.

"What?! So I got wet for nothing? Why Lord Jesus?! Why!?" cried Nico.

"As if you actually give a shit," Diego laughed.

"True," said Nico nonchalantly, "I would've jumped in anyways. Let's do this."

“Can I just wait for you guys here? My parents would not be happy if I came back home dirty.” said Andrea.

“We’ve got an extra pair of rubber boots, I’m sure one of them will fit you,” said Diego.

“And what about my shirt and pants?”

“We’re just returning the fish to the acequia, not digging up potatoes.”

“*Still*, I don’t want to chance it.”

“Alright, alright. Can you guys turn off the oven and put the pan de yuca back in the freezer while I go get some clothes for Andrea?” he said and went to his room for sweatpants and a t-shirt.

“You can change in my room if you want to,” he said when he returned, handing the clothes to Andrea.

While Andrea changed, Nico and Diego retrieved the bucket from Nico’s room and went outside to put their boots on. When they were done, they looked out onto the bit of land they called home and felt their eyes adjust to the dimming light surrounding it. Although shadows were closing in on their longest forms, it was that time of evening when darkness didn’t yet dull steps.

“Done! Don’t you guys have a flashlight or something? It’s getting dark out here,” said Andrea as she joined the boys.

“We used to, but Diego lost it about a week ago,” said Nico.

“I can’t believe I lost it. You’ll see — it’ll probably turn up around the house as soon as we buy another one. It always happens that way. But don’t worry, your eyes will adjust. Also, the moon is nearly full tonight, so it won’t get as dark as you think,” said Diego.

Andrea wasn’t a trusting person in general and normally would have insisted on Diego asking his mom for a flashlight — “*just to make sure*,” she would say —, but something about Nico and Diego’s light-hearted confidence made her feel safe. Instead, she asked the boys to lead her to the famous acequia she’d heard so much about.

“Those are blackberries, they’re delicious. But, careful when you get close! They’ll prick you good,” said Nico, leading them through the thick between the orange trees and blackberry shrubs and lifting a band-aided ring finger for them to see.

And so he went, with the lemon trees — “Spiders love hanging out in those,” —, then with the orange trees — “Sometimes, oranges look a lot

like lemons. Never pick those in a rush” —, and with the guava trees — “Definitely don’t eat those. They’re so delicate mosquitoes have been leaving their eggs in them.”

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Andrea. Are those mandarins? Those tiny little things?”

“Between the peaches and blackberries?” asked Nico.

“Yes! I’ve never seen bite-sized mandarins before.”

Diego and Nico went silent, looked to each other, and had a quick laugh.

“Those are actually normal mandarins, but mom says some kind of virus is making them grow smaller and smaller every time. They are bite-sized and cute, but it’s only because they’re sick,” explained Diego.

“Oh, that’s so sad,” said Andrea; her smile drooping in recognition of the ill-fated mandarin trees.

Diego picked two mandarins off the tree and handed one to Andrea.

“They’re still really tasty though,” he said.

“Thanks!” Andrea answered and started to peel her mandarin.

As they approached one of the irrigation ditches Nico ran ahead with the bucket. “Do I just dump them all?” he asked, raising his voice to make sure Diego could hear him from behind.

“Yeah, go for it!” he answered.

“Have you guys always lived here?” asked Andrea.

“Pretty much,” said Diego. “We moved here when I was 3, Nico was only 1.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said looking up at the sky. “I can’t believe you can see so many stars from here.”

Diego smiled. “It really is. Want to meet Heineken?”

“Heineken? Like the beer? Also, where do I put the orange peel?”

“Anywhere. It decomposes, you know, the way organic things do,” — he snickered at Andrea’s unamused face — “And yup, just like the beer!” he said as he made his way into the darkest area of the farm. “Are you coming?” he turned to ask Andrea after a few seconds.

“Why Heineken?” asked Andrea, starting her way towards Diego.

“Dad loved beer,” answered Diego with a smile.

The evening had turned to dusk and the dusk was starting to look like night. Andrea contemplated the thick of trees lost in darkness behind

Diego. “It’s *really* dark in there. Not even the moon and stars are getting through. I’d rather stay here,” she said.

“True, but there’s another kind of light that way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not giving anything else away,” said Diego, knowing how stubbornly curious Andrea was, and kept walking.

“Wait for me!” called Andrea as she ran to catch up with Diego. When she caught up, they silently walked side by side, with each step replacing their surroundings with darkness. Her heartbeat quickened at the thought of the unknown and her mind raced to figure out what Diego meant by Heineken and the mysterious lights.

“Should we call for Nico?” asked Andrea as they came onto a short wooden bridge.

“Nah, he saw us coming this way — he’ll come if he wants to. He probably found something else to do.”

“Are you sure this bridge is safe?” asked Andrea watching the bridge bend and creak as Diego walked onto it.

“Yup! My dad and I built it ourselves five years ago — he said it would be good for at least a decade. Also, Nico and I jump on it once a month to make sure it’s safe.”

“You guys are actually insane. That is *not* a safe thing to do,” she said stepping onto the bridge.

“Not entirely. But, it got you to trust the bridge — didn’t it?” said Diego and knelt down to open a cooler beside the other end of the bridge.

“What’s that?” asked Andrea, referring to the grainy brown chunk of something Diego pulled out of the cooler.

“It’s *panela*. It’s a solid form of brown sugar. Here,” — Diego reached out his hand with a cubic inch of panela — “Heineken loves this stuff. You can try it if you want, it’s tasty.”

Andrea took the panela from his hand and nibbled on it. “Huh, you’re right. It’s really sweet. You’re annoying, you know that? Heineken, Heineken, but you won’t even tell me — *shit!*” Andrea jumped at a sudden snorting sound bursting out of the darkness.

Diego laughed. “Take it easy, you don’t want to spook him. *Es un goloso*, he’s just excited from smelling the panela.”

“Goloso?”

“Oh, right — you’re a *gringa*. I don’t know if there’s a direct translation, but ‘sweet-toothed’ comes pretty close.”

“Hey! You know I hate being called that. Thanks for the translation though.”

Diego thought of the rough time Andrea had getting used to Riobamba when she first moved there. It had been two years since. He remembered how shy she used to be and how broken her Spanish was. “*She’s come a long way*,” he thought to himself and wondered how he would have managed if he had moved to the United States at 7-years old. He took a step toward her.

“I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. And you’re welcome, anytime,” he said.

Relieved to see Andrea smile and accept his apology, he turned around and started making clicking sounds by repeatedly pressing his tongue to the roof of his mouth and pulling it downwards.

Andrea observed curiously as she heard stirring noises. As she traced the noises with her eyes, she saw a brown horse make its way toward Diego. Heineken towered almost an entire meter over Diego, his head as big as his torso. Diego was holding his hands behind his back as Heineken sniffed at his sides.

“*He must be smelling for the panela — how funny*,” thought Andrea.

“Come closer, he doesn’t bite,” he said and brought his hand up and towards the horse. Heineken pressed his muzzle onto his closed hand as if trying to pry it open with his lips. “See,” he said and started scratching Heineken’s forehead. “Now, when you feed him, make sure that you lay the panela on the center of your palm and spread your fingers out and back as far as you can. That way you make sure he doesn’t bite one of them accidentally when he bites for the panela,” he said as he followed his own instructions. With one bite, Heineken had the entire chunk of panela in his mouth.

Andrea loved the sight of the horse chewing and wiggling his tongue around to enjoy the treat. When he was done, she came a little closer and offered him her chunk of panela, taking care to follow Diego’s instructions. Her heart sunk slightly when she saw Heineken’s mouth widen and show his big teeth, but she was quickly comforted by the gentleness with which he took the panela and stepped back to enjoy his treat.

“Can I touch him?” she asked.

“Of course. Just don’t make any sudden movements or loud noises. If he does get spooked, stay calm and take a few steps back. Oh, and try not to stand behind his hind legs.”

Both kids scratched at Heineken’s crest, shoulders, and flank in silence while the horse kept trying to sniff their bodies for panela. It didn’t take long for Heineken to give up and just enjoy the scratches while munching on grass.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” asked Andrea out of the blue.

“I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it. You?”

“Well, first I want to get into Northwestern, that’s where my cousin studied. I want to study journalism there so I can be successful and travel all over the world telling stories like he does.”

“Sounds like a pretty good plan,” said Diego, not exactly knowing, but guessing at what Northwestern might be.

“Yeah. My dad says everyone needs a plan if they want to go anywhere in life. That’s mine. At least, that’s the short version.”

There was a short bout of silence again.

“I’m pretty sure you’re a math genius. Maybe you could do something with that!” said Andrea, noticing Diego was out of his comfort zone.

Diego smiled. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

Suddenly, the bridge began to creak. Heineken raised his head and ears in reaction to the noise — Diego took Andrea’s hand and stepped with her away from Heineken.

“Sorry I took so long,” said Nico out of breath as he stepped off the bridge. “I wanted to keep the two-streaked fish so I had to go get a smaller bowl to transfer him to before dumping the bucket.”

“You’re all good, we’ve just been hanging out with Heineken here and talking about the future. What do you want to be when you grow up?” asked Andrea.

“Married! So I have someone to take care of me. I’ll take care of her too, of course. Oh, and I want to have a cow named Betsy,” said Nico with all the confidence in the world.

Andrea giggled warmly. “That’s a great dream, Nico. You don’t want anything else?”

“Nope!” he said and jogged off on his own towards the trees behind Heineken.

Andrea hadn’t noticed just how dark it had gotten. She looked up to the sky hoping to see some light, but was disappointed by a thick grey cloud. It hung over her and covered the only bits of the heavens that would have otherwise lit up through the treetops. “Can we go back now, *please?*” she asked, hoping either of the brothers would sympathize.

“Of course,” he said. “Just know,” — he paused — “you’re about to miss something pretty cool. I know it’s scary, but that’s the beauty of it. One second all you can think of is darkness, the next...”

At that moment, Nico came back with his hand gently closed over something. “Look,” he told Andrea and uncurled his fingers.

She stared inquisitively at the tiny black bug on Nico’s palm. Without a buzz, it darted away. She kept her eyes fixed on it, trying to hone in on what made it special, but it vanished into the forest. Confused, she looked to Diego. She saw his eyes embrace Nico; they flickered above a tender, but wavering smile. She turned and saw Nico, wide-eyed, looking out in the same direction she had. She traced his gaze into the forest and, as if with the flick of a switch, they were there.

Fireflies. Off and on they went, shining and hiding, dancing around her like threads of light threaded into, then out of the night. “*He really doesn’t want anything else,*” she thought — knowing, somehow, that Diego once felt the same.

Then, “*Eucalyptus.*” She traced it from thought to scent and found a leaf crackling between Diego’s fingers.

“I’m sorry,” he said, noticing Andrea’s attention shift from the fireflies to him. “I just love the smell.”

She smiled. “Don’t worry, I love it too. It reminds me of home,” she said, for the first time, without Boston in her mind.