

Third Place Winner

The Shrimp Dance's Secret

Samuel Ramirez

The guitar strings sang out in a rhythm that seemed to come from the earth itself, a *kumintang* beat, old and hypnotic, with roots deeper than memory. Tito Dominic's fingers moved across the frets in that peculiar way that made the wood speak in two languages at once: the bright *ting* of the melody line, and beneath it, the deeper *thrum* of accompaniment that felt like a heartbeat.

On the platform, bare feet began to move.

Andres watched from the dock, his toes curling against the warm wood. He was seven, with his mother's light skin and his father's dark eyes, with Creole blood running through his veins alongside the Filipino salt water that his father said never truly washes away. The sun was rising, turning the bayou into something that looked like it might catch fire.

Andres watched from the dock, his seven-year-old frame still, his dark eyes fixed on the five men positioned over the spread of pink shrimp. The shells glinted in the rising sun.

First came Tito Teo, the fastest of them. Then Tito Salvador, Tito Marcos, Tito Pedro, then his father, Rogelio. Their feet positioned themselves over the shrimp, and as Tito Dominic's strumming accelerated, they began to move in synchronized patterns: tap-tap-tap-step, tap-tap-tap-step. Not stomping. Precise. Deliberate. As each heel came down, a shrimp shell cracked open, revealing the white meat inside.

The pattern was almost musical, a counterpoint to the guitar. Tap. Shuffle-slide-tap. Tap-step-tap-tap. The shells broke in cascades. Around the platform, the five men moved as one organism, their rhythm flawless, their breathing synchronized. Tito Dominic's strumming shifted. The *kumintang* that had been slow, almost mournful, suddenly accelerated. His fingers became a blur against the strings, and the melody! Ay, naku, the melody! It carried something in it that made Andres's chest tighten. It sounded like longing and defiance all twisted together.

The feet began to move in earnest.

It wasn't the *Tinikling*. Andres knew that dance, had seen it at gatherings, two people clapping bamboo poles while dancers jumped between them with impossible grace. This was different. This was a dance designed by necessity, by the marriage of Filipino rhythm and Louisiana shrimp and the stubborn refusal to let work be just work.

Tito Dominic's voice rose in Tagalog, words about the sea, about labor, about something that sounded like a prayer and a curse all at once. His strumming grew more frantic. The dancers' feet met the platform in perfect unison one final time, and then they stopped.

The silence was profound.

His father opened his eyes and looked directly at Andres. He was sweating, his feet bleeding slightly where shells had cut him, but he was smiling. He stepped down and walked over.

"Why do you dance on shrimp?" Andres asked, the question finally escaping.

Andres's mother had told him to stay quiet and watch. She was part Creole, part something else. In another life, she worked the riverboats, speaking French and Spanish and English all in the same breath. She understood something about displacement, about people who found themselves in places that weren't quite home but had to become home anyway. She'd say, "Hush, *mon fils*. Let them do their work."

His father looked back at the platform, where the other uncles were already at work, but not collecting. Instead, they moved methodically, using long wooden rakes to spread the broken shrimp across the platform's surface. They arranged each piece so sun and air could reach it all.

"The shrimp must dry," his father said. "Not today. Not tomorrow. For days, perhaps a week. We break the shells so the meat can dry faster. But the real work is the waiting."

He gestured toward the village behind them, where houses rose on tall wooden pilings like insects balanced on impossibly thin legs. The structures were remarkable, built on stilts driven deep into marsh mud and oyster reefs, elevated high enough to clear even the worst tidal surges. They reminded Andres of the drawings his father had shown him once, drawings of villages from the old country, nipa huts perched above water in a faraway place on his father's maps called *Las Islas Filipinas*.

"Come," his father said. "Sit with me while they finish."

They settled on a bench overlooking the platform. Below them, the bayou water lay still and dark.

"Do you know why we built our homes this way?" Rogelio asked.

Andres shook his head.

"Because we remembered," his father said. "When the Spanish took us from our homes and forced us onto the Manila galleons, they tried to take our memory too. They wanted us to forget who we were, where we came from, what we knew." He paused, watching the uncles work. "But memory lives in your bones, *anak*. It lives in the way your hands move. It lives in the places you build."

He pointed toward the village. "When we came here to this bayou, we found water everywhere. We remembered the villages of home, the *baryo* built on stilts above the water, where our ancestors had lived for generations. We said to each other, we know how to do this, we know how to survive."

"How long have we been here?" Andres asked.

"Saint Malo was built long ago, 1763, some say, though no one keeps perfect records. We were already here, already building, when the Americans didn't even know we existed." His father's voice carried pride, but also something else—defiance. "There are other villages too, across the water in Barataria Bay. All of us living together, all of us remembering the old ways while we learned the new ones."

On the platform below, Tito Teo was using a long wooden tool to separate shrimp meat from shells that still clung to it. The white flesh gleamed in the fading light. It would stay here, spread across these wooden platforms, for days. The sun would beat down on it. The wind would dry it.

"Why do they dance?" Andres asked again, returning to the question that had started everything.

His father was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was different, softer, carrying the weight of a confession.

"A long time ago," he began, "long before you were born, our people were sailors. The best sailors the world has ever known. We navigated by the stars, by the currents, by the whisper of the wind." He paused, and something dark crossed his face. "The Spanish came and took our skill and our pride, and they made us *sirviente*—servants.

Indentured. They forced us onto the Manila galleons, those great ships that carried goods across the ocean. They worked us like beasts, *anak*. Worse than beasts."

Andres didn't understand all of it, but he understood the pain in his father's voice.

"The journey took months. We were packed into the holds with silk and spices and our own desperation. Men died from sickness. Men died from despair. The Spanish and the friars worked us without mercy, because we were not quite men to them, we were tools, machines to be used and discarded." His father's hands clenched into fists. "And yet we survived. We survived because we remembered who we were. We remembered home. We remembered that our bodies belonged to us, even when our labor did not."

"How did you get here?" Andres asked.

"Some of us jumped ship in Mexico. Some of us escaped when the galleon docked. Some of us were simply let off and left to fend for ourselves, bodies worn out and useless to the Spanish anymore." His father looked at him then, and his eyes focused. "We made our way north and east, following rumors of a place where a man could work for himself, where the Spanish reach was long but not quite long enough. We came to *la Louisiane* because here, in this bayou, there was water and fish and no one to tell us what to do with our hands."

At day's end, the sun touched the horizon and began to sink. The sky turned colors that had no names, purples that bled into oranges, reds that faded to amber.

"But why do *y'all* dance on shrimp?" Andres asked again because the question was still there, still unanswered, and he could feel that the answer was close now, just beyond his understanding.

His father smiled then, a real smile that erased some of the shadows from his face. "Because," he said, "we discovered that work and joy do not have to be separate things. We discovered that the body remembers how to dance even when the mind has forgotten how to hope. We discovered that if you make rhythm out of breaking shells, if you make music out of necessity, then you are saying something the Spanish could never silence. You are saying: I am still here. I am still myself. I will not be broken."

He gestured toward the platform, where the uncles continued their methodical work, spreading, arranging, making sure each piece of shrimp meat would receive the sun's blessing. "Every time we dance on those shrimp, we are dancing away the hold of the galleon. We are dancing for the men who didn't survive the journey. We are dancing because we can. Because no one can take that from us. And we are dancing to

remember that we built this," he swept his arm across the village, the stilted houses rising like a prayer made into wood, "this place where we live above the water, just like home, just like our ancestors did before the Spanish ever came."

The work would continue for days. The shrimp would slowly lose its moisture, drying in the sun and wind.

"Will I dance someday?" Andres asked.

His father put his arm around him and pulled him close. "If you choose to. But first, you will watch. You will learn. You will understand that freedom is not something handed to you, it is something you must create, moment by moment, with your feet and your heart and whatever music you can find. And you will remember that we built villages on stilts, that we danced on shrimp, that we took what the Spanish tried to destroy and made it into something beautiful."

The stars were bright now, scattered across the black sky like scattered shell. In the distance, a frog called out, a deep, resonant croak that seemed to echo from the heart of the bayou itself. And Tito Dominic, packing up his guitar with reverent care, began to hum the *kumintang* melody again, the notes floating out across the water and the stilted village like a prayer, or a promise, or perhaps both at once.

The shrimp would dry. The men would return tomorrow, and the day after that, to turn them, to spread them again, to tend them like children. And someday, perhaps, Andres would stand on that platform with his own feet, learning the ancient rhythm that had somehow survived the ocean crossing, the galleon holds, the Spanish whips, the long journey through swamps and rivers and into this impossible, beautiful place that his people had claimed as home.