

BROKENSONG

A Novel

By

Ernesto A. Ospina

This book is dedicated to everyone who shared the dream in the autumn of 2008.

“What experience and history teach is this – that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history.”

- Hegel

“Saw myself in the highlands at the age thirteen – and I’m asking questions to the present day me.”

- Matisyahu

“Man’s main task in life is to give birth to himself, to become what he potentially is.”

- Erich Fromm

BROKENSONG

By Ernesto A. Ospina

I

2008 was a bad year. All around, probably the worst of my life, and that includes the year I first had my heart broken, the year my old man passed away in his sleep, and the year my uncle Charlie died of AIDS in the sweaty throes of a fever dream. I spent much of it walking alone in the dark, unemployed, crashing on friends' couches, fighting with my family, heartbroken, self-destructing and wretched.

The first seconds of the new year found me in New York, once again. The City calls to me, and I return from years abroad to find it changed, yet eternal. The permutations of its storefronts and buildings slowly shift over the singular essence of the place, steady as the bedrock on which it's built. A human life is like that. River of molecules, shaped by the landscape of your soul, carried by the gravity of your fate, streaming down from the mountains of your past to the ocean of your future. Currents clouded by the detritus of the world, terrified, hungry for answers, always-changing. A drop in the sea, ever becoming the rain.

2008 was the last year of the Bush regime; the year of an aborted global depression; the year America elected her first black president and began to turn her back on him; the year the world paused, however briefly, and glanced down

that dark and broken road we'd followed from the twentieth century into the new millennium.

My generation came of age in that moment of inflection, that historic instant when human kind danced with a drunken devil on the edge of a cliff, mad with genocide, gorged on blood, blinded by tears, feverish with global warming. Ours is the story of a quarantined generation, disfigured by a triad of hijacked planes, tortured and brutalized at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, rendered and boiled alive in Uzbeki prison cells, raped in the caked dust of Darfur, stoned on the streets of Kabul, blown to small pieces outside a mosque in Najaf, choking to death on the intractable malevolence of the latest mutation of our own half-forgotten demons.

How easily we might have fallen from that drunken cliff-dance. How easily we might yet fall, the light of humanity snuffed out like the improbable flame we are in a vast cosmos of indifferent darkness and gorgeous streams of lonely stars, spinning forever apart. We chose the light, and it will be for the generations that follow to stay the course we have set, or fall back into the darkness.

2008 was a bad year. It was also the year everything began to change, for me, for my generation, for the world. But that only came at the end, and it's only half the story, a broken song that can only be seen in hindsight.

II

I was determined to get spectacularly drunk to greet the new year. I had a dangerously large bottle of Chivas Regal and a pack of American Spirits, paid for by unemployment insurance, and I was going to get through both before the sun lit the sky on another bloody year in the new bloody millennium.

Unemployed for half a year, it felt like half a lifetime since I'd been a part of civilization. It was a state of alienation that I had been preparing for my whole life. Bad enough I was the brown skinned, sad little resident alien eating his lunch alone in the library while the other kids played handball in the concrete schoolyard. Bad enough I was too melancholy and self-absorbed to make many friends in college, and later at work, or share more than a passing wave with my neighbors. Being unemployed was the culmination of all that, bringing it into the starkest relief. It's hard to explain to anyone that hasn't lived through it. Like you're an impostor in your own society, there but not there, a stranger to strangers. A Martian wearing the mask of humanity, knowing, deep down, you're all lizard green and ugly where it counts.

It was a costume party. My costume was a cheap plastic Viking mask to cover the top of my face and my thick beard to match below. Swarthy Viking, like the Black Irish. There must have been a few, right? Whatever, it was all I could afford. My friend Nick Lesano was throwing the party at his place in the

Fort Green neighborhood of Brooklyn. Between him and his roommates they'd invited close to a hundred people that night. It was going to be a kickin' New Year's bash. A real rager.

Sera would be there. She, Nick and I were a platonic triad that dated back to grad school. The first time I met her, on a human rights retreat in my first year at Columbia University's masters program in international affairs, she ended up lying on my lap, staring into the fire someone had built, and I felt more comfortable with her than I had with any woman.

I found out she was gay only weeks later, when she introduced me to her girlfriend at a SIPA mixer on a boat on the Hudson river that never left port; trans music blasting in her bowels, dancing lunatics, drunk on desire, crawling all over her like a tribe of happy apes.

That first night, in the woods by the fire, we didn't kiss, our connection transcended the sexual. I figured that part would come later. It was simplicity, love and communion at first sight. She was so beautiful, her heart was so like mine, we fell easily into a friendship that would be tested that night, years later, New Year's 2008.

Obviously to all but her, I had feelings for her from the start. I was a shoulder to cry on when she broke up with her girlfriend and rejoined the ranks

of heterosexuality. I was the one she told about her first encounters with a penis, her dark confessions after feral nights in the New York clubbing scene.

I was by her side when she started dating my good friend William, and I was the one she called the night they broke up, shortly before he showed up at my door with an empty look and a sleeping bag. I had been by her side through numerous liaisons and aborted love affairs, I had listened to it all, waiting my turn; to paraphrase that prophet of poetry, Bob Marley, waiting in vain for her love.

I had pursued loves of my own during that time, of course. But I was always waiting, even when I didn't know, or refused to let myself know. That New Year's night, I wasn't even thinking of Sera in that way. Our friendship would cross into unknown waters like a blind ship. Navigation lights can turn off with heady drink and the turning of years.

There were a bunch of people from our masters program at the party. There was blue eyed Jack Lehmen, with his twisted, sardonic smile, his penchant for expressive whistles and his South Asian sensibility, who Sera had a bad crush on towards the end of school, to my generous envy. There was Andrea, a smart as shit lawyer, drunk as hell, all over Nick, pressing herself against him in a way she wouldn't even remember come the morrow (we'd remind her with a laugh, and watch her blush); there was Hammond Jones, the

brilliant, curly haired journalist, who I competed with for several women over the years and who always won, the lofty bastard. There was one-legged Amir Burmit, with his caustic British wit, for whom nothing was serious, nothing really mattered, a trait which was reassuring at times, in an ugly world. There were many more characters in that seething crowd, but that's enough to set the stage.

I've always found the last moments before New Year's to be surreal, like I'm watching them happen on film. Time seems to narrow as the world tumbles on in its headlong spin around our sun, and we pass that invisible marker in the dark night of space, that silent point in the darkness where we were a year ago. And nothing seems really to have changed all that much from one pass to the next, but over the decades everything changes so much it almost becomes unrecognizable.

It's just another night, right? Another hour, another minute, another second, like any other. Curious apes, humans. We create meaning from the darkness, we impose order on the chaos. New Year's Eve means something to me, I think it means something to everyone, even if they won't admit it. That's another thing about this curious species of hominid: our phenomenal capacity for self delusion. It's a survival adaptation.

We counted down in a big chorus, and I was pretty drunk already. I remember the party din coalescing into that slowly descending chain of numbers and I looked around for my friends, but none were nearby. I was alone, surrounded by the Brooklyn crowd, swallowed by the human beast, being digested as the numbers counted down towards that fine line between yesterday and tomorrow. I closed my eyes as we counted down to zero, and when I opened them, everyone was hugging and kissing and I was still alone. I felt as though it had always been so, because it had, and somehow, even then, I knew that it would always be so.

I felt sorry; briefly, immeasurably sorry for myself. Then I pushed the feeling away, pushed my way through the crowd, and kissed Sera like I'd always wanted to. She was surprised; I don't think she had ever looked at me the way she did then. We parted ways, only to reconvene later on, when most everyone had left, and we were helping to clean up. I stopped her as she walked by with a bag of trash, and I kissed her neck, and she smiled and said that was nice. Later still we appropriated the futon in the loft space above Nick's room, and she told me she didn't want to make love. I'm sorry to say I kind of begged, and she said maybe eventually, and I knew it would never happen.

We kissed, though, and touched one another, and she was right. It was nice. It was very nice. The next morning I was completely besotted with love, and she was snoring, tangled in the borrowed sheets.

I left her sleeping there to ride the subway back to my high school buddy Bolo the Cholo's empty flat in the West village, where I was crashing for a week while he experimented with a mind-searing array of drugs on a seriously esoteric vacation somewhere in the South Pacific.

I showered and changed clothes and did my morning victuals, then set out for Hammond Jones' Brooklyn studio for the traditional January first gang brunch. By the time our eyes met again, in Hammond's place, whatever magic had allowed me that one night of closeness with Sera was gone. She made that clear with a look and a smile, and I tried to accept it, but it broke my heart a little bit more than it had already been broken by Ilaria, a year before, and I don't think I ever really recovered from it.

It's funny, you'd think if your heart is big enough to love two women at once, it'd be strong enough to take losing them both without cracking like a sorry egg and spilling the yolk of your soul all over the place. What a fucking mess.

Part of the problem was I'd been standing alone so long I'd almost forgotten what it was like, almost forgotten how soft a woman feels when she's

in your arms, how warm a pair of lips can be when pressed against yours. Sera reminded me on New Year's Eve, and the knowledge was all the crueler for being fleeting as the glimmer between one year and the next.

We parted ways after Hammond's January first shindig, and I walked down to the Hudson, down below Houston street, where the park runs close by the water and you can see New Jersey across the river. Ever since high school, that's where I've gone to be alone, when I need to be okay with it. The waves have always reminded me of a secret that has allowed me to go on living through the worst pain of life.

Everything always changes. Just like the formless permutations of the water, like the river used to freeze over in winter, like the ice flows slide by on the current, transient like happiness, transient like pain. If there is one great constant in this vast and unfathomable cosmos, in love, in the strange and glorious ways of women and men, it is just this: change. Everything always changes. Go figure.

III

I booked a flight to Colombia with the last of my savings a few days after New Year's. Didn't say goodbye to anyone. Didn't have anything to say. Left a monosyllabic thank-you note for Bolo the Cholo that he probably wouldn't

decipher until the drugs etched their way through his system, some days after his return. I wouldn't hear the details of the preternatural ape's sojourn for the better part of a year, but Bolo and I were cool like that. Months and dog-years of experience would pass and our friendship would remain undiminished, ready to be retaken at the next opportunity. I banished him from my thoughts after locking the door and leaving the keys with a wizened Korean neighbor. Bowed and smiled. Walked to the subway, dawn lighting up the sky all pink and orange above the concrete canyons of New York. Took the A-train all the way out to JFK, and tried not to think of anything at all.

I was born in Colombia, but I grew up in New York. I'd returned to Bogotá after grad school in search of work, in search of meaning, of belonging, in search of the home I'd never had. Ilaria had come with me. That was before I chose something I still can't understand over the simple perfection of her love, and drove her away without knowing what I was doing.

I found work in Bogotá, lost love, and discovered that there is no such thing as home. Now I was going back, and this time I didn't even know what I was looking for. This time, maybe I was just running away.

My cousin Jaime is like a brother. We're six months apart. Outrageously handsome, with Latin-blond waves of hair and bright hazel eyes, he's always been lucky with the ladies, but otherwise screwed by fate. His father, Uncle

Leon, chose mushrooms, herb, papayas and the neighbor's cow's milk over a career long ago, and is wasting away his sixties on my grandfather, Papathereso's farm outside Bogotá. Or he's writing the poetry that will one day make him famous, probably posthumously. We'll see.

It fell to Jaime to make his way in this world without the support most people of my generation expected from our parents. It fell to him to help smooth that path for his sister Danelia, and his younger brother, Eduardo.

As a child, Jaime would get inexplicably infected cuts and weird ailments that made doctors scratch their heads and mutter about viruses. He never had as many toys as I did. I would always bring him something when I came to visit over the summer, something I would pretend I didn't want anymore. I don't know if he understood the nature of these gifts, but if he didn't, he must have thought I was one fickle, easily disinterested and stupendously lucky rich little bastard. Which I suppose, in a lot of ways, I was and still am.

He picked me up at the airport, and it was a good thing the flight was delayed by almost three hours, because he'd been drinking the night before and had woken to a missed alarm clock and groggy curses, halfway through the afternoon. Still, he was there when I got out past customs, waiting amidst the crowd outside the terminal. I passed him by in the throng, and he almost didn't

recognize me in my fedora and massive trekker's backpack, bleary-eyed and bewildered.

He called out, not my name but the word “Bicho”, which translates somewhere between “creature” and “monster”, and would be best applied to some sort of slobbering dog-sized roach perched way up near the ceiling in a corner of your living room when you come home after midnight. The Latin rock band Fabulosos Cadillacs have a great song, Mal Bicho, which Colombians of a certain generation and political inclination considered an apt paean to our then-president, the monstrous Uribe.

I turned at the sound of Jaime’s voice behind me, our eyes met, and we laughed, because for an instant the years and heartache that separated us melted away and the absurdity of life was manifest. When that happens, all you can do is laugh and hug the person that lifted, however briefly, the weighted veil of life’s illusion and revealed the weird cosmic grin beneath.

We piled my shit into Jaime’s car and were gunning the engine down the highway towards El Centro, the wooded slopes of Monserrate towering over the downtown skyscrapers, opposite the white virgin of Guadalupe, the air redolent with a mix of alpine freshness and burnt tires, car exhaust and the trees lining the boulevard.

Bogotá is a burnt mountain, infested with hives of mad apes, its colonial heart overlooked by green hills and corporate towers, its edges crowned by shanty slums that climb the hillsides north and south. These were hidden now by smog and distance, but I knew they were there. I had worked with community groups in the northern slums. Years later, living in D.C., that fragmented archipelago of American race and poverty, I would wonder if it was the inescapable nature of capital districts to embody the inequalities and fissures that stain the soul of their nations.

The family was waiting to receive me, back at my grandparent's place, but we didn't go there, not yet. We drove into El Centro after a brief consultation, driving the rest of the way in silence, windows rolled down, an unfiltered Pielroja cigarette burning in Jaime's left fist, his elbow resting on the door as he steered one handed and I took in the sights of the closest thing I'd ever had to a homeland.

We parked in a narrow lot near the Plaza de Toros apartment complex on seventh avenue. Ten minutes later, we were clinking beers on the patio of Quiebracanto, my favorite pub. The balcony was mostly empty in the afternoon, looking out over the myriad rooftops of the colonial city as the sun began to set across the vale. Jaime asked why I'd come back and I told him I needed to figure some things out. He had the tact not to ask me what, or how, or why, or

what the fuck I expected to find here that I hadn't found before. I was glad for that.

We knocked back a few Costeñas; cheap, amazing Colombian beer, and made it to my grandmother, Mamatheresa's house for an early dinner, wolfing down the lasagna they'd bought from the corner restaurant. I regaled the family with what few exploits I could dredge up from my recent unemployment in Gringo-land. Putting a good face on a bad situation. For a Colombian, that's kind of a national pastime. Patriotic, almost.

Later in the night, Jaime drove off to his woman and the stepson she'd once left him to bear, to a family he'd made for himself in the mouth of an old heartache. I took a cab to my old man's house in Nicolás de Federmán, a middle class neighborhood named after a long-dead German conquistador.

The apartment was walking distance from the National University, where my old man had taught the history of Colombian labor movements. He'd passed away a few years before. The apartment was mine, cold and empty, but full of all the things he'd collected and built up over the years of a full life, all the *chécheres* that I hadn't the heart to get rid of. The place remained, in fact, exactly the way he'd left it.

Sometimes, I think back to the way the old man's apartment looked that night in the dark and the spilled light from the hallway, as I stood there in the

door and took in the emptiness. I think back to the way everything was, all the little trinkets and decorations the old man loved, covered in a layer of dust, an imperfect memory of him. Sometimes I think that's the way the whole world becomes when we die, and our ghosts wander the dusty corridors and howl with the remembered, glorious agony of the flesh.

When the hallway light flicked off on its energy saving timer, I started to cry like someone had flipped a switch in my heart. I closed the door with trembling hands, and wept for all that is sad and empty in this world.

I suppose I should have started looking for work the next day. That was part of what I was thinking when I bought that ticket. I was more likely to find work in Colombia than in the States, the economy being the way it was that year. After all, I had found work in Bogotá after grad school, with less experience. I should have started looking right then. I didn't.

I dusted off the kitchen and went grocery shopping with the last dregs of my bank account, which went a hell of a lot further than they would have in New York. Food for a couple weeks. Toilet paper. Cleaning supplies. I sat in the empty apartment and stared at my handiwork, and imagined Ilaria lying naked in my old bed in the other room. Smiling, she could so easily be there, could be mine to cherish even now. But then I would be there with her. I would not have woken the day before with the dawn to get on a plane and fly over the Americas

with tears in my eyes and a lump of corroded steel in my chest. I would not have stood in the empty doorway the night before and wept.

She was another branch on the tree of my life. I sized it up like a monkey measuring his odds, prehensile tail quivering deep within the slick, primordial folds of my mind. Perched on this branch of sorrow. Lost to me forever now, our love a broken thing; and yet so vivid, so real, so close I could almost reach out and brush my hand against the gentle curves of her smile.

She never really left me. I didn't understand until that morning, sitting there, hindsight brilliant as a noon sun, banishing at last all the shadows. It was me, who'd chosen something else over her, something I still don't understand. It broke her heart to go, and she told me so, those years ago in that burnt mountain of a city, when I wouldn't listen. Begged me to change course, begged me to give her the place in my heart I'd always kept locked away and shut down.

I heard the words back then, but I listened to them now, like they'd been somehow trapped in the curtain of honey that had been my life. I had watched her go and told myself it was her choice, that I had to respect it and move on, because this was easier to believe. Because I was a boy pretending, trying desperately, to be a man. A boy who refused to shoulder the burden of our heartache. I walked away, lost, into a wall of amber honey that was sweet enough to coat the livid horror eating away at the core of my soul like some

rabid cancer of the spirit. Walked away like a man castrated, and it took years to begin to heal.

I might have preferred now to have taken that other branch, and be entwined with Ilaria that morning, making love to her, or just watching her slack, baby features as she slept, her imperfect nose, perfect, her lips slightly open, soft and lush as her womb. I might wish for the children of another man that live in bliss within her now; for them to be ours, for an old age watching them grow and discover the magic of this unimaginably cruel and fragile and pungent human life.

But I did not choose that. I chose this. It was time I start living up to it. I powered up my laptop and sat in the early morning sunlight, and felt a profound sense of gratitude for the holiness of this precious moment, granted me in the early years of the twenty first century, in the heart of a city that would never be my home, to live and breathe still, and hammer these words into the ages.