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2010

“Palanthria”

About seven years ago, when times were different and the adolescents of today’s generation were still very young, things seemed remarkable for a young man who was a stranger to the outside world. The economy was in good shape, kids were always outside with grins on their faces, and this young man had no doubts to how his life would be in the future.

It was a bright and sunny morning when James Marquez woke up on a Saturday around eight a.m. in one of the mountains of Palanthria, a small island one thousand miles east from the coast of Jacksonville, Florida. James had always wondered what it was like living the states. His father was a doctor in the field of psychology, and his mother was a nurse working for the hospital in Sherrytown, the capitol. He had no siblings, and he liked to keep to himself most of the time. The day seemed like it would be different, and James didn’t know exactly why. After brushing his teeth and eating breakfast, he got ready to depart and explore more of the island.

“Mom, I’m taking Sonny for a walk,” James said with an eager expression.

“Okay, hun’. Just make sure that you’re back for lunch, alright?”

“Okay, mom!”

James grabbed Sonny’s leash, tied it onto his collar, and headed out the door. The sun was beaming, and it seemed like a perfect day to hang out with friends. For a thirteen-year-old boy, James had a vivid and lucid imagination. James and Sonny walked about a mile down the street to visit a close friend of James named Tony Ramirez. James and Tony grew up together. They knew each other since they were in Kindergarten and went to the same schools. James was more of an explorer while Tony was a popular, athletic girl who was a dancer at their school.

“Hey, James. Do you want to go down to the beach?” Tony asked.

“Sure. Let’s go. I bet I’ll beat you to it!” James said, as he got ready to run.

James, Tony, and Sonny hauled their way down the mountains taking shortcuts through the trees and skipping through people’s yards where they finally made it down to the beach. They were out of breath and sighed in relief when they made it. They took a sip of water at the old fountain by the pier. James tied Sonny up to a pole near the beginning of the pier and took a walk to the end with Tony.

“How far do you think it is from here to the states?” James asked.

“Wow. I have no idea,” Tony replied in a wonder-struck tone. “If I ever become famous, I will travel the world, and I’ll bring you with me.” Tony smiled as she sat there with her feet dangling from the edge of the pier.

“I hope so. No matter what happens, I’ll always remember our friendship,” James said.

“Me too,” Tony replied as she grinned. “We’ll always be friends.”

“I hope. I think it’s time we get back. My mom wanted me home for lunch.”

“Okay. Let’s go. If you want, we can hang out again later tonight.”

“Sure. That’s fine with me.”

James and Tony headed back to the beginning of the pier and untied Sonny where they headed back home. It was getting close to noon, and James was getting hungry. James loved eating pizza on the weekends while Tony was over. They made it back to James’s house right on time for lunch. It started raining, and they all stayed inside and ate lunch together as a family. After lunch, Tony thanked James’s parents for the pizza and headed back home.

James went to his room and put on his favorite movie, “Hercules.” He watched it as Sonny laid beside him. After it was over, he turned on the news and saw what was going on around the world. He liked being a Palanthrian, but at times, he felt like a prisoner of his own state, as if he was forced to like something imposed on him his entire life. One day, he hoped to find out what it would be like to travel the world. James had

never been outside of the island, and he was getting tired of seeing the same people and the same scenery all the time. As a young boy, he had no choice but to deal with it.

A few hours later, the phone rang and James picked it up. It was Tony.

“Hey. I need to talk to you,” Tony said sounding upset.

“Sure. What’s going on?” James asked.

“Meet me at the pier in an hour.” She sounded as if she was about to cry.

James’s adrenaline rushed as he pondered what Tony wanted to talk to him about. He made his way back to the pier where he waited for Tony to arrive. Shortly after, she came walking slowly from the beginning of the pier towards the end near the water where James was. She appeared to be distraught and had dark circles under her eyes.

“Tony! What happened?” James asked as he panicked.

“It’s my dad. He beat me for coming home late. I honestly can’t take this anymore, James. I don’t know what to do,” Tony replied.

“This is crazy. I can’t believe this. You know what? Maybe I can talk to my parents to see if you can stay with us for a few nights. How’s that sound?”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you. This isn’t the first time it’s happened. I need to get out of here. Me and my mom are leaving.”

“Leaving? You can’t just leave. I barely know anybody here. If you leave, then who will I hang out with?”

“I don’t know. I’m so sorry. My mom is sure about this.”

“Where are you going?” James asked as his heart pounded faster.

“We’re moving to New York by the end of next week. My mom has family that lives there. I think this will be for the best, James.”

“Are you sure? I hope you really know how this will affect me and our friendship. I hope you know,” James said as he looked down at the water.

James and Tony shed a tear and hugged each other.

As each day passed, James wasn’t able to sleep. From the moment James woke

up, he went straight to Tony's house and they hung out for hours. At school, they were practically inseparable. Tony was going to a place where the children of Palanthria often said they dreamed about going.

"Don't get me wrong," Tony said to a group of students. "I like this place, and I wish I could take all of you with me, but I can't be here anymore. I will miss all of you."

"We will miss you too," one of the students replied.

After a long week, it was a Friday afternoon, and it was Tony's last day of school. Teachers and parents watched as tears rolled down their children's faces. Tony said her final goodbyes to her fellow classmates and headed home after her mother picked her up from school.

After James got home, he headed to Tony's house where he saw Tony's mother and Tony packing as her father watched. Tony seemed as if she wanted to go. There was nothing James could do. James reminisced on all of the times they had and instances they shared, and he couldn't believe that Tony was leaving.

After Tony finished packing, they went outside and played hide-and-seek for what seemed to be the last time. It was the most fun game in the world to James because he knew that Tony would find him whenever he was lost. Each second he saw her, he engraved each moment into his memory.

By the end of the night, they headed back to Tony's house. James hugged Tony as hard and as long as he could. He stood there with his arms around her for almost a minute, which seemed to be the longest minute of his life as he hoped it wouldn't be the last time they saw each other.

"I won't forget you, bestie," James said.

"I won't forget you either," Tony replied.

"Write me when you get there."

"I will. I promise."

With those very words, James left Tony's house with a broken heart, and he

headed back home. Tony's flight was the next morning out of Palanthria International Airport in Sherrytown. Although he was sad she left, he was happy that Tony was doing something that he dreamed about doing himself. He arrived back home where he found Sonny waiting for him in his room.

"It looks like it's me and you again," James said as he lied down on the floor. Sonny licked James's face, and shortly after, they fell asleep on the carpet.

It was a new day and nothing felt the same. James went down to the shore and collected seashells where he would bring them back and put them in his room. Now that his best friend was gone, he kept even more to himself. It seemed as if there wasn't much left on the island anymore after Tony left.

Weeks had passed, and James had not heard from Tony despite the fact that she promised she would write him when she arrived to New York. For some reason, James had a bad feeling this would happen. James thought about the times they had together starting back from kindergarten until the present moment. He reluctantly accepted the fact that people change over time and that perhaps the friendship, as he knew it with her, was over.

He decorated his entire room with posters and things that reminded him of the outside world. He went to school as a normal, quiet individual with a big heart. His fellow classmates often asked him about Tony's whereabouts, and he told them she was fine even though, in reality, he didn't really know. That simple question remained a mystery in James's mind. James wondered if he did anything wrong to Tony and why she didn't keep her promise. He assured himself that he didn't do anything wrong. He hoped Tony was okay, and he tried to ignore the facts and the wonders when they arose in his head.

"There must be another lonely kid on another small island somewhere in this world," James said to himself. He remembered one of his favorite quotes that his grandfather always used to say, "*he who walks alone walks the fastest.*" After weeks of

Tony's absence, James adopted that theory and lived by it to compensate for her failure to keep her promise where he became more introverted than he already was.

It was finally the end of James's seventh grade year. It was approaching summer, and he anticipated that he would stay home or go out and collect seashells for his collection. One day, James was in his room when his parents called him to come to the living room.

"Hey, son. How would you like to go to summer camp this year? I think you would really have a good time," James's dad asked.

*No, of course not*, James thought, but then he realized that if he joined, he would get a chance to travel outside of the island and see more of the world.

"This could be my first chance to really see what's out there," James replied.

"That's right. So maybe you should take this opportunity."

James was soon convinced, and he told his parents he would join. It was for the entire summer, and it would be an experience he hoped he would never forget. A week after school ended, he joined summer camp.

The day he arrived, he received the schedule, which showed what the kids would have for lunch and where the kids would be traveling to each week. James's first reaction was to see all of the trips. He wanted to know exactly where he was going. The first couple of weeks, the schedule showed he would go on trips around the island to places he hadn't been to. For the following couple of weeks, he would be traveling overseas to nearby islands. James looked at the paper and was distressed to see that he wasn't traveling to the states. James put down the schedule and turned toward a student next to him.

"Hey. I thought we were going to be traveling to the states," James said.

"We are! Look at the very back page of the schedule," the student replied.

James was ecstatic for a moment when he learned that he forgot to check the back page of the schedule. As soon as he turned to the back, there it read that they were indeed

going to be traveling to the United States of America for the last couple of weeks. The first trip was to Orlando, Florida, the second was to Washington D.C., and the third and final trip of summer camp was to New York, New York.

At that moment, James's heart filled with sorrow as he reminisced on the times that him and his best friend, Tony Ramirez, once shared. At the same time, he was filled with joy knowing that he would be near the place where Tony said she would be. He went home that day to tell his parents the news.

"Dad, guess where I'm going," James said.

"Where?" his dad asked.

"I'm going to the United States!"

"That's great, son. I'm excited for you."

The first week of summer camp, the children traveled to a museum on the other side of the island. This was interesting to James because he loved artifacts and the whole idea of exploration. The second week, they went to the island zoo, which had an array of wild animals. James had visited the zoo before, but it was a few years back during his elementary school years. The third week, the students went to the old fort that was in Sherrytown where James learned all about it. He was intrigued by the idea of ancient creations and learned a profuse amount of history about the fort. The fourth week, the students went to the beach, the same beach that James had always played with Tony at as they grew up together. He stood there at the pier in disbelief and cried. He thought about Tony once again and couldn't understand why she didn't keep her promise or why she never wrote him. On the fifth week of summer camp, the kids boarded a small ferryboat and headed to the nearby island of Selmon, a small island with less than five thousand residents widely known for their sand. *Wow. This place looks just like home except a little smaller,* James thought as he reached the island. For the next four weeks, the children went to other small islands within the vicinity. Then, the week that James had been waiting for finally came. It was the tenth week of summer camp on a hot summer

day. James was finally heading to the United States of America.

The night before leaving, James packed all of his stuff, and he sat down with his family.

“Take lots of pictures for us, son,” James’s mom said.

“Don’t worry. I will,” James replied. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The next morning, the students headed to Palanthria International Airport to take the next flight to Orlando, Florida where they would be staying for a week until going to Washington D.C. It was James’s first time on an airplane. He thought it was the most amazing thing in the world as he gazed upon the beautiful view of the mountains and the rich, deep, blue sea down below. It was about a three-hour flight until they hit the mainland. Finally, they arrived. James was jubilant, excited, and also in disbelief to finally be in a place outside of the islands he always knew as home.

“I’ve never seen a place like this,” James said to another student.

“I know. Neither have I,” the student replied.

The students took a bus to a hotel in Orlando, Florida. They went to Disney World and to Universal Studios. It was something unimaginable for James. He felt as if he was living in a dream as he traveled with the other students throughout the parks. Each day was a roller coaster of excitement and emotions for him. The following week, James and the students took a bus to Washington D.C. where they explored monuments and fascinating, historical venues.

On the twelfth and final week of summer camp, the students finally headed to New York. It was enormous compared to the small island of Palanthria. James’s eyes widened as he saw the giant skyscrapers outside of his window pass by him as he rode the bus. He was full of awe and excitement. The venue they sought was Times Square. There was a famous artist that was going to be performing that James had never heard of. As soon as the students reached the venue, they got out of the bus and walked towards the

show. There was a team of young dancers in their teen years that were part of the pre-show. Right there at that very moment, James could not believe his eyes. As soon as the dancers got onto the stage, he immediately noticed one of the dancers. It was Tony Ramirez.

“Wow! Is that really her?” he asked himself. “It can’t be.”

The artist came out on stage, and James wasn’t enthralled as his mind was focused on who he had just seen. He stood there for a minute in silence as the reminiscence of Tony’s friendship silenced the heaviness of noise that surrounded him.

After the show was over, James walked off in disbelief ignoring rules to stay close to chaperones. Tears rushed down his face as he remembered who used to be his best friend now living her dream. He never thought he’d see her again. He was absolutely in shock. It felt good and bad at the same time. A plethora of questions filled his head. He realized, at that moment, how lonely he really was without her.

“Now what?” James asked himself. “This girl was my best friend. What do I do?”

James walked back to where the students were, and he told his chaperone that he needed to see one of the dancers from the pre-show. The chaperone told him that he wasn’t able to. James couldn’t believe it. He felt his heart break a little bit more than it had a few months earlier after Tony left. He shed a tear and looked up at the ceiling.

All of a sudden, James heard a voice calling his name over and over.

“James, James, James!”

He heard this voice continuing to call his name and looked all around him. He had no idea what it was. He heard the voice again.

“James!”

James was confused in a daze.

All of a sudden, the time went back to the day that Tony was leaving to New York a few months earlier.

“James, wake up!”

James woke up on the carpet next to his dog Sonny and realized that he was in a dream. Tony paused for a second and looked at James right in his eyes as James regained consciousness and looked back.

“James, I’m not going anywhere. I couldn’t do it,” Tony said.

“Tony? Is it really you?” James asked in confusion.

“It’s me. My mom canceled the flight. There’s no way I can leave you, James,” Tony replied.

At that instant, a sense of joy and relief filled James’s mind.

“Tony, you left me,” James said.

“I didn’t,” Tony replied.

“I just had the worst dream of my life. You were actually gone, and now you’re here. What about your dad?”

“I am here, and I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know about him, but I will get through this, and I want you to be there no matter what.”

James was in shock to realize he was dreaming what felt so real. He got up from the carpet and let Sonny out of the room. He looked around to see all of the posters of the outside world that he placed there in his dream were not there.

“Tony,” James said as he looked into her eyes.

“Yes,” Tony replied.

“I would rather have you as a friend than go to the states any day. I want you to know that. Our friendship means the world to me,” James said as a tear rolled down his cheek.

“Me too, James, me too. I promised we’d always be friends, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did,” James replied as he smiled. “You did.”