

MIAMI WATER TRIBE

by

Kara Allison Stambach

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Miami Water Tribe

Leo sits on a beam of rotted wood in an abandoned house on the edge of Miami. Outside, another howl of wind, a buckle of heat, and the tall palm trees bend back. Wedges of dimming sunlight filter through the slats in the roof—his only light by which to read.

Stacks of books surround him. Escape routes. They are covered in vinyl, county library stickers, and the greasy fingerprints of those who came before him. It doesn't matter that he's not their first. The words transport him. He opens a book and squeezes out the story like wringing water from a rag.

He is thin and too tall; his cheeks and hipbones are ridges where the skin stretches taut. But if he has a book, hunger can be ignored. On nights when there are no stories, the world is colorless and everything sounds like the clanging of empty tin cans. His belly pangs and suffers. Leo seeks books as a prisoner seeks the sight of blue sky from his cell window. He devours the words and is full.

Each of the tales are like brothers and sisters. The paper, thin and porous as skin. The creases of pages where others have dog-eared their place. Jackets, wrapped in crinkly plastic, decorated with strange art, grinning open like masks at the Festival of the Dead. After school, he sits and reads for hours, placing books under the waves of light and sky, wishing he could write so well.

A scurry, a shuffle. The rats in the rafters. Flies buzzing through holes in the boarded-up windows. Gaps in his concentration like potholes in a road. This house is a *living thing* and he must be careful not to disturb it. It is soaked with rainwater, dust, and debris. There is one permanently wet sofa on the first floor, next to a table with broken legs. So many holes in the walls; he can't stay here at night. After losing the sun, he goes to sleep at the shelter and listens to the other children tell stories about Blue Lady and Satan and *La Llorona*. Sometimes he writes it down. On paper, if the social workers have any to spare. Or napkins. His jeans. Shoes. Any surface that can hold ink, he'll tattoo with tales.

He is fourteen. Too old to be like the others, really. Too quiet to have any friends. He almost never speaks. Leo is a poet—a nightingale with no song.

He is alone. Alone except for a stray cat he's named Phat Cat, who sometimes curls up on his lap.

Leo is a sailor on the white sea of a blank page, navigating without the aid of stars or maps, using only instinct to avoid drowning.

1502A.C.E.

In the Aztec city of *Tenochtitlan*, the goddess *Cihuacoatl* takes the form of a beautiful lady draped in white garments.

Throughout the night she cries out in misery, “*Oh hijos míos . . . ya ha llegado vuestra destrucción. Donde os llevaré?*” Oh my children . . . your destruction has arrived. Where can I take you?

Many believe that *Cihuacoatl* was speaking of the future conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards.



Santistevan, Bernadine <http://www.lallorona.com>

NationsBank Neon

When you're nine and sleeping on the street, neon signs are almost like a nightlight. They're comforting, soft and pale—humming, thrumming—and best of all: they mean the angels are nearby.

After night falls on Miami, the angels come out and nibble on the pizza slice ads, and the XXX video marquees, and the lotto signs of the liquor stores. But the best place is the near the NationsBank building in the heart of downtown. Lots of them gather up there and gobble up the greens and pinks and golden yellows of the skyscrapers.

“They eat light so they can fly,” Anton says.

Once upon a time, angels used to gather at cathedrals and feast on the filtered light that streamed through sections of stained glass. But too many people stopped going to church, so now the angels go to the new temple—the bank. People make their deposits or take out their cash down below, and high above them the angels float undetected, swirling and

savoring the essence of activity and light, preparing for the next major battle.

God is exiled and the doors of Heaven are locked. It's up to the angels and kids like Anton to open them again.

"There's a lot of killing going on in Miami," he tells the shelter kids solemnly. "You want to live, you got to learn to fight. Learn the secrets."

The others gather round the steps of the shelter's back porch and listen hard. Jose and his cousin, Pedro, then Deacon and some other boys. Leo, off to the side, always alone. Then there are the girls: Shayna, Sabrina, Gabriella, and Marcina. Plus the little ones—Maria, Anita, and Miguel. They huddle together, blocking the curious gazes of the two old men and crazy Vianna in the recreation room. Then Sister Magdalene comes out and tells everyone it's time for supper.

Trees shiver in the evening breeze.

Gypsy Anton

The best thieves have long fingers—the kind that delve deep into your pockets. And bright smiles, so you never notice that your pockets are empty until it's too late.

Thief. Mummer. Bard. The shelter kids call him Gypsy Anton. He tells the secret stories, every night, just before bedtime. A nine-year-old troubadour who speaks a bridge between two worlds. Sneaks into the movie theatres through backdoors and steals the afternoon picture shows right off the screen. Trades legends like a gypsy with beads or seeds or bolts of cloth.

On the outside, Anton is pimples and mosquito bites and skinned knees, but inside . . . if Anton were a color he would be a blooming red, or the bright orange of an open flame. He is a fire-swallower. A dream-shaper. Gypsy Anton stands before the other children and weaves the banner under which they assemble. He is concerned with their names, with their legacy, and with what their lives will mean to the future.