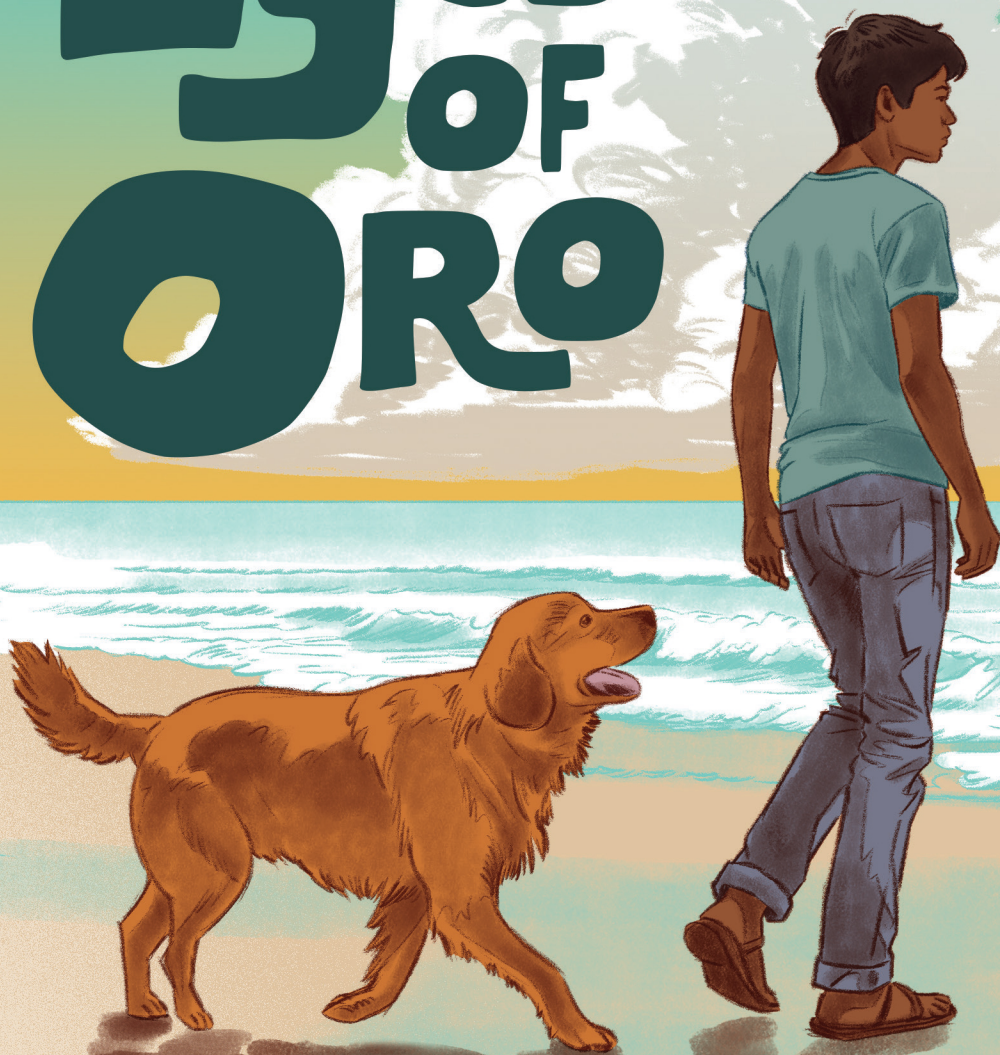


# The Eyes OF ORO



**ROBERT L. PHEN**

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Robert L. Phen

THE EYES OF ORO by Robert L. Phen

Published by PhenBooks Publishing

First Edition, April 2025

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2024915570

ISBN: 979-8-9912230-2-7 Paperback Edition

ISBN: 979-8-9912230-1-0 Hardcover Edition

ISBN: 979-8-9912230-0-3 Digital Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A SPECIAL THANKS TO MY WIFE, Marie, who has patiently listened to my story synopses, read and commented on my drafts, and endured my countless, silent stares into space.

Thanks also to:

My daughter, Heather Delman, who long ago typed the first draft of this book,

Members of the Merano Writers Group of Pasadena, Calif., who listened to and commented on the book as it developed chapter by chapter, especially Jane Hallinger,

Dr. B.K. De Paolis, Mike Riherd, Christopher Askew, and G. T. Foster,

Fernando Peralta, who noted areas in the draft that needed clarification,

Family members and friends, who long ago read early drafts,

Kathleen Kaiser of Kathleen Kaiser & Associates (KKA), who made the publication of this book possible. As publishing consultant, she kindly reviewed early chapters and described a manuscript format needed. And she recommended a copy editor and publisher,

Flo Selfman of Words à la Mode provided expert copyediting,

José Ramirez of Pedernales Publishing brought his extensive publishing experience to produce this book.



# The Eyes of Oro



PART 1

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THE RESCUE





## CHAPTER 1

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LIKE A SOLDIER returning from the battlefield, I have kept this story to myself. For reasons I will make clear later, I tell it to you now.

Late one night more than thirty years ago, I climbed the fence that Raúl had climbed three months earlier and dropped into el Norte. I would follow his path. Behind me and to the east, the lights of Tijuana glowed. To the west of downtown in the canyon and hills known as Pancho Villa sat the home I was leaving. Before me I saw only blackness. The unknown and possible danger filled me with fear. In my blanket roll I had a map, drawn from memory, of the one Raúl had shown me of his path north. It seemed so clear when Raúl showed it to me. But my map was only lines on paper. In the darkness, I thought it was no real guide at all. I sat quietly by the fence for many minutes, listening for *la migra*, the immigration police of los Estados Unidos, hoping that I had not been discovered. Fear of what might lie ahead froze my body to the fence. As if to wipe away my fears, my thoughts went back to Oro and Raúl, to the time when we met. Not even one year had passed, but it seemed to contain half of my life. It all began at *la playa*.

I was fourteen years old when I first saw Oro at la playa, the beach, in 1974. For almost three years before that time, I went to la playa to draw. At la playa, I could escape from the city and feel the peace of the ocean. I brought with me pieces of paper I had collected during the day. Then, with charcoal I found in the sand, I sketched.

I sharpened small pieces of charcoal with my knife for making fine lines. Larger pieces made broad lines.

When I first came to la playa, I drew pictures of the beach houses. Most of the houses were owned by the rich of Tijuana. *Norteamericanos* rented some of them on weekends and for vacations. I could draw those houses easily, because I could see them, and I could easily draw what I saw.

I also drew the waves as they washed up on the shore. Sometimes, the waves were small and seemed to trickle slowly to the sand. Sometimes, as in winter, they rose to great heights, breaking with the sound of thunder, as the hand of a father upon a bad son. In spring, when clouds covered the sky and shut out the sun, the waves were dark, and the ocean and sky were many shades of gray.

As I grew older, I did not draw the beach houses, waves, and ocean. Instead, I drew the people and places I had seen during the day. Sometimes, I sketched what I had seen in the city. I drew scenes of Avenida Revolución in July with *Norteamericanos* crowding in the shops. I drew the many cars lined up at *la frontera*, the border. I also drew the upholstery shops, the pottery shops, and the garages with their many *Norteamericano* customers. In those drawings, I always showed many people and motion. I drew workmen at the race track. When it burned down and put many people out of work, my drawings showed emptiness and loneliness.

Most often, though, I drew the people of Tijuana around their homes. The magnificent homes of Chapúltepec, by the golf course, I drew for a while. But I did not go there very often, and few people could be seen there.

Instead, I drew the people of Pancho Villa where I lived. Houses of every description covered the valley and hills, many built by their owners. Some were well made, such as the house of my father. Others were made of sticks, metal pieces, fabric, and paper. Well-made homes mixed with the others. Some were

made of concrete and brick with corrugated roofs. And some were made of wood with wooden roofs and asphalt shingles of different colors — red, green or brown. Some houses were painted white, but many were not painted at all. A few fine houses could also be seen, such as the house of *señor* Cardenas. It had walls of stucco, a green asphalt shingle roof, a small grass lawn, a garden, and even two goats. But *señor* Cardenas had a green card, *premise de trabajo*, and worked every day in los Estados Unidos. He could live there, but he chose to live in Pancho Villa. When I stood on a hill and looked down into the canyon where I lived, I could see house after house after house crowded together in many shapes as if piles of stones and sticks had been brushed by a great hand and left to lie in an odd, mixed jumble of litter.

In Pancho Villa, many people filled the streets and shops. Voices and sometimes music could be heard from nearby and distant streets, shops, and houses. There were carts, such as the one Guillermo pushed. His contained drinks, but there were many others. Women picked over the vegetables at the market. Men visited and drank in *la cantina*, and others stood outside near the front door, talking with their friends, even as it is today. Children played in the dirt streets among the houses and around my school, which stood high on the hill to the south. Sometimes, I sketched my friends as they studied and played

Often, for fun, I drew people in places other than where I saw them, doing things they never did, and wearing different clothes than their own. I drew Norteamericanos pushing carts, old *señor* Cardenas with the face of one of his goats. The more I sketched each day, the easier I could remember and draw what I had seen.

With much regret, when the sun almost touched the water, I stopped drawing, and I buried my sketches in the sand. I did not bring any drawings home, because my father did not think I should waste my time with drawing. When I first began to go to *la playa* to draw, he became angry with me. But if I did not speak of

la playa and brought him money from the work I did after school, he did not question me. Later, he said nothing about la playa. That was because of Raúl and Oro and the Garcia child. But even if my father said nothing with his mouth, his silence and his looks showed disapproval.

When the sun touched the ocean and began to disappear, I ran for home, because it is a long way from la Playa de Tijuana to Pancho Villa, and there is danger along the road.

One day at la playa, as the light faded, I first saw Oro.

## CHAPTER 2

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GRAY CLOUDS covered the sky, as they often do in May. They touched the ocean at the horizon, so that ocean and sky seemed to be one. Except for the waves crashing on the sand, there was little other motion at la playa late that Monday afternoon. Those who used the beach houses had gone. The bull ring to the north stood deserted, when only yesterday people crowded into it. The gray of the day seeped into my mind so that I was not inspired to draw, even though I had brought colored chalk with me. I had wanted to draw with color, but that afternoon there was little color to see, and I could only sit and stare.

As I sat in that way, I suddenly felt the presence of Oro, though I did not have a name for him then. I turned, and behind me on a mound of sand stood a large dog, looking down at me. His thick golden brown coat reminded me of the color of the hills in summer. His chest was broad and his legs powerful. He was a dog made for work, surely a dog of México. His eyes looked at me from a fine head with a long muzzle. They showed kindness and knowledge, as though he were very old. But also, they showed the innocence of youth. Such a look is difficult to explain, but that is what I saw in his eyes. I was not afraid of him, and he showed no fear of me.

He stood looking at me for only a few moments when three boys, who were older than I, passed me and walked down to the water. Oro followed a few meters behind them.

The boys and Oro had reached the water and began to walk south along the wet, hard sand. To the north on the sand by la

cantina, a man, surrounded by five large spotted hounds, raised his hand and gave a command. A wave crashed, and the dogs ran silently toward me. I scrambled to my feet and backed quickly away from the water. I frantically looked around for a stick or anything to use to defend myself.

As the dogs came nearer to me, they veered away and sped past me, a great spotted dog in the lead. His yellow eyes were fixed on the three boys, as were the eyes of his four smaller companions. The dogs raced for the boys. I shouted, but the sound of the waves muted my voice. Though I tried again, no other sound came from my mouth. Then, I saw the truth. The dogs pursued not the boys, but Oro.

The large spotted dog reached Oro just as Oro saw him. Oro turned to meet him, but the hound, biting, grabbed Oro by his right hind leg, spinning him to the sand. The other hounds quickly pounced on him.

Oro fought back, but the large spotted hound held his leg. The others bit at his legs and chest and back and sought his throat. But the jaws of Oro found one of his attackers, who yipped and fell away. Sand flew in the air around the twisting bodies as they snapped and bit. Oro lay on his back, kicking with his free legs, snapping and biting, trying to rise. But each time he rose on his front legs, another of the spotted dogs leaped on him, knocking him down. He rose and fell and rose and fell again, and each time, the spotted dogs renewed their attack, while the largest held fast to his leg. Then, Oro did not rise again.

A shout came from the north and the spotted, yellow-eyed dogs reluctantly moved away from Oro. They glanced back at him, hesitated, and then trotted back to their master, a large man with black hair that fell across his face. He had walked toward the fight, but had not come near it. He took little notice of what his dogs had done, but returned with them to the north. His commands were mixed English with Spanish, as I had heard along the border, and they were seared in my memory. I believed him to be a Norteamericano. I

hated him. Because of him, for a while I hated all Norteamericanos. Only much later, I understood why that man attacked with his dogs. Only much later, I regretted ever seeing him.

Oro lay still upon the beach, and I thought he was dead. Then, his head lifted, and he struggled to rise, but fell again and lay still.

The three boys had watched the fight and now returned to Oro. But they did not help him. Instead, they taunted him. I thought Oro was their dog. Was he not? They threw seaweed on him and whipped him with it. They piled more seaweed on him until he lay still on the sand. Laughing, they continued their walk south along the edge of the water. Why would they do that? Why were the man and his dogs and those boys so cruel?

I could not understand what I saw. All that time, I stood as one paralyzed. What could I do against five dogs and three older boys? But was I only making an excuse for my inaction?

After the boys left, I went to the wounded dog and knelt beside him. Oro lay quietly, panting heavily from the fight and his wounds. He lifted his head to look at me. The innocence was gone from his eyes, which instead showed confusion and pain.

I spoke quietly to him. "I am Ernesto. I am your friend." He lay his head back down, and his tail slapped the sand.

I removed some of the seaweed that covered him. I was careful not to hurt him. Also, I watched him closely, because a wounded dog will sometimes snap, not realizing what he is doing. But Oro lay quietly, lifting his head twice to see what I did.

After I removed all the seaweed, I sat by him, lifted his head, and held it on my leg. I stroked his head and again told him I was his friend. His eyes looked at me, and his tail slapped the sand, telling me that he was my friend also. "Why would anyone do this to you?" I asked him. But he answered only by slapping his tail on the sand.

Wounds covered his body. Blood matted the fur on his shoulder, his side, and his left foreleg. His right hind leg hung



bloody and mangled. It seemed not a leg at all, but a horrible attachment that did not belong to his body.

He lay close to where the water touched the shore. The tide was low, and I knew that he could not remain there, or the water would rise up and cover him. But he was too large for me to pick up and carry without causing him great pain. I told him that I must move him somehow, but I did not yet know how. I laid his head carefully back on the sand and told him I must find help. When I left him, I felt that he did not know I would return to help him. He turned his head and, with sad eyes, watched me go.

I ran to the houses on the beach to search for help, but found no one. As I passed by one of the houses, I saw a cardboard box filled with wood. I dumped out the wood and tore the box so that it became a flat piece of cardboard. This will have to be his bed, I thought.

Carrying the cardboard, I ran back to the wounded dog. By that time, he lay only a few meters from the water swirling up the sand. Darkness was coming, and I knew that I must find a place where he could lie safely for the night. I gently pulled and pushed him onto the cardboard. Although I thought he was in much pain, he made no sound. Pulling the cardboard, I dragged him, a few meters at a time, toward the beach houses. I stopped twice to rest, because he was heavy and hard to pull. I found a place to leave him under a porch of one of the houses where he would be out of the sun. Searching among the houses, I found some towels hanging across a porch railing which I used to bind his wounds.

I found a tin can which I cleaned and filled with water from a faucet by the house. I put the water down beside Oro and lifted his head so that he could drink a little. Stroking his head, I told him I must go. I also told him I did not think the innocent should suffer for the acts of evil ones. In my heart, I called him *el uno Inocente*, or *Inocente*, the innocent one. But for a name to speak aloud, I

called him Oro for his golden color and good qualities. I told him I would return tomorrow when I could.

I wished to stay with him all night, to talk to him and to comfort him. But even then I thought that I would feel the hard hand of my father for being late. Because I had earned almost one dollar American money for the family that day, I hoped my father would be pleased and not hit me.

I ran most of the seven kilometers to Pancho Villa, first past the beach houses to the highway, Calle Malinche, which followed alongside the border fence. I ran on the highway past two small canyons, Colonia México and Misión Sol, where there were many small houses of the poor. In some ways, those places were like Pancho Villa, except they had no shops and no good houses at all. Past the cemetery, I turned toward the hills to home.

Two blocks to the south of Calle Malinche, as the land rises into the hills of Pancho Villa, the streets which were paved became dirt. When I reached that part of Pancho Villa, I could run no more and walked the remaining distance to my home.

Here, along the narrow streets and passage ways that follow up and down the hills, stood the houses of the people of Pancho Villa. My house was built by my father, who was good at construction. He worked for a company contracted by the government to build and repair roads around Tijuana. He worked very hard and often came home tired, but still he built our house. He built walls of concrete block for four rooms — a large room in front for visiting, cooking, and eating, a small bathroom, and two rooms in back for sleeping. He had piped cold water to a faucet outside the house and, with the help of a friend, installed electricity to light the front room. I had one room for myself since my sister had left to work in Chapultepec, caring for one of those big houses. My father had built a good house. “Someday,” he said, “I will pipe cold and hot water into this house.”

When I arrived home, my father was already there, as were my

mother and my sister, Teresa. My sister usually stayed at the home where she worked, but that night and for the next two days she did not work because her employers were away. She had worked there for only a short time, but I heard her tell my mother that the people were strict and unfriendly, even though the house was beautiful. My father did not like hearing that. He did not want my sister to work in Chapúltepec.

“You do not need to be a servant,” he told her. “There is other work you can do.” But what could he say, when she told him, “It is good work, and we need the money”? So he let her go. Always, though, when she came home, he questioned her about her work, but he did not tell her to stop.

Teresa and my father were speaking together when I entered the house. To my relief my father took little notice of me. Because of Teresa, my father did not strike me for being late.

That night I ate little. After the meal and more talking between my parents and Teresa, a cot was provided for me in the front room while Teresa slept in my room, as it had been before she left. When I went to bed, I found sleep difficult. Oro was in pain. I could almost feel it.

## CHAPTER 3

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THE NEXT DAY, I rose before the sun and ran all the way to la playa. Oro lay there as I had left him. He tried to rise to greet me, but he could not. I stroked his head until he lay quietly, and his tail slapped his cardboard bed in contentment. It was his smile to me. He did not complain of his injuries. I told him that such a brave one as he would be better soon and that I would care for him. I put fresh water in the can and told him I would return later in the day with meat to give him strength. His eyes told me that he trusted me, and he did not try to get up to follow me when I left.

Time at school passed very slowly that day. Each day after school I stopped at a store to seek work. Usually, there was none. This day I did a little work — I carried some merchandise from that store in the city to the border for a Norteamericano tourist. I earned one whole dollar American. That day I was lucky to work for someone so generous. I did not have to find other work, but ran from the border to my friend señor Aceves, the butcher. I bought a bone with a little meat on it. Then, with the sun still high in the sky, I ran back to la playa. Even though I am a good runner, I tired and took almost one hour to reach the beach houses. Oro lay where I left him, but even from a distance, I saw a change. Although he could not rise, he again wagged his tail in greeting, so that it beat his cardboard bed. But the change startled me. He lay on a clean old blanket on top of the cardboard, and the bindings of his wounds had been changed. The towels I had used had been replaced by clean white cloth taped to his body and around his wounded leg. Someone skilled in the bandaging arts had done it.

He looked cleaner. Someone else was caring for him. I cautiously looked around, inspecting the house, but found it empty as were the houses nearby. Returning to Oro, I offered him the bone I brought. But he would eat little. Did his wounds leave him with no interest in food, or had he already been fed?

I again filled his can with fresh water. I stroked his head and told him of Pancho Villa and how he would walk with me there. I told him of the shops, of my school, and of my house. I described Pancho Villa to him in detail, as one who sketches with fine lines.

I told him that my sister, Teresa, had returned home. She always talked and laughed so that the house seemed brighter when she was there. But our house is always colorful. My mother has put many pictures on the walls. She has made coverings for our beds and a yellow cloth for the table. She has painted and decorated our chairs. All these things that she has done made our house brighter than any of the houses of my friends.

I told Oro I looked at Teresa to see if she had changed since she began to work in Chapultepec. She was still thin and stood straight. She had not yet grown fat with good food. My friends said my mother looked younger than her age. Perhaps Teresa will be like her. What can I say about a sister? My friends said Teresa was very pretty. I told Oro that her hair was the same as before, dark brown and combed straight to below her shoulders. And she wore the small gold earrings my father had given to her. They were the only gift he had given to her. I had nothing to compare with them. But Teresa had never feared my father, as I did. I noticed that he even smiled when she was home. "And you, Oro," I said. "What would you say of Teresa?" But he only slapped his tail on his bed. What else could he say? He did not yet know Teresa.

I looked at Oro, stroked his head, and told him of my father. He again complained about prices. Beans now cost ten pesos for a kilo. I scratched Oro on his back, and he looked at me with eyes that could not believe such high prices. Teresa said that even

people in Chapúltepec were eating more beans instead of meat. My father at first smiled, then he frowned and said, "So that is why our prices are high. The rich are now eating our beans."

My father worked hard on the roads, I told Oro. He was not tall, but he was very strong in his arms and shoulders. He always talked of getting other work that would pay him more money, and he had many ideas. Our neighbor, señor García, unlike my father, seemed content to live poorly and spend much time at la cantina. My father wanted better for himself and his family. That was not easy in Tijuana, where many people come from all over México to seek work.

"And what will you do, Oro," I asked, "when you go to Pancho Villa with me? There will be no food for you at my door. There will be little food at any door. You should know that dogs are not always welcome. Will you be like my father or like señor García?"

Oro looked at me with eyes that no longer showed confusion as they did after his fight, but again they looked out with contentment and innocence.

"What have you done before now, my friend?" I asked. But he kept his secret, and his eyes and his tail smiled at me.

"You do not want to be like señor García," I said to him. My father said to me more than once, "Success in Tijuana comes to those who are brash or have some money to start a business." He always talked of starting a business. "Those who are serious and will work hard," he said, "must hold onto their jobs and keep their eyes open for better ones." There were other ways he said, corrupt ways, but he would not talk of them. For seven years he had worked on the roads for only sixty pesos a day. He had not found any better work.

I told Oro that because of the high prices and the poor wages my father received, my mother had a machine and sewed garments for a shop in the city, and I worked after school to make more money for the family. But I did not mind working, because I saw much that I could draw. "And my drawings brought me here to you,"

I said to Oro. “Three years ago I first went to Plaza Monumental, the bull ring by the sea, to shine shoes.” I pointed to the north for Oro to see the bull ring. “Later,” I told him, “I shined shoes in the city, even though it is forbidden, and washed car windows at the border. I sometimes ran errands and carried merchandise for businesses in the city. I worked with my friends Diego, Chaco, Jesus, Paco, and Yuko. We, from Pancho Villa, looked out for and protected each other from *chucos*, other neighborhood gangs. After working, I went to la playa to draw. And now that has brought me to my new friend, Oro.” He slapped his tail, smiling again at me.

After I told Oro all those things and stroked his head, the light of the sun had disappeared into the clouds on the horizon. All the time I spent with him I looked around for the one who treated his wounds. Although I saw some men at la cantina and other people moving about some of the houses in the distance, none came forward or said anything to me. As I ran home that night, I wondered, Who, with me, cared for Oro. Was it one of the three boys who had mistreated him? Could one of them have returned, because he felt badly about what he did? Was it one of the people from the beach houses? Or a man from la cantina? Or possibly one who only passed by? All that night I wondered, What was the answer to this mystery?

## CHAPTER 4

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THE NEXT MORNING and afternoon and the morning after that I returned to care for Oro. Each time I found him almost as I left him, and he always greeted me with a thumping of his tail. I sat by him and stroked his head while I spoke to him of my day and told him that he was a brave dog. But he ate little of the food I brought for him. I knew that the other one who cared for him also fed him.

On Thursday afternoon, after I had been to school and worked, I returned to la playa. I saw from a distance that the place beneath the porch where Oro had been was empty and I ran to it. Only a depression in the sand remained in the shade under the porch where he had lain. The cardboard and blanket bed were also gone. I was like a fish thrown up on the sand, thrashing around. I ran around the house and others nearby, but Oro was not there. Nothing indicated that he had been dragged away. And I did not think he could have walked by himself. If he did, he would have left his bed. Someone had taken him. I felt as if someone had ripped away my most precious possession. Sadness rose up inside me like a great wave and crashed down on me, overwhelming me. I looked again around the houses for signs of Oro, but found nothing new. He was gone.

I sat on the sand in front of the beach house and looked out at the ocean. Clouds had returned, and the weather had turned cold. The waves were small, with gentle surges of the water upon the sand. Seaweed washed in and out along the edge of the water in front of me. A piece of driftwood floated in it, captured. Like



the driftwood, I felt captured in the gray of the day. To draw the way I felt, I would have taken a large piece of charcoal and drawn wide lines of gray circling me. No, I would have made the drawing black, black, black! I put my arms on my upturned knees and my head upon my arms and closed my eyes to see Oro in my mind.

Sadness continued to cover me, but I began to realize that my sadness was partly self-pity, because I would not see Oro again. I would not be able to touch him or look into his eyes. I would not receive his friendly attention. I would not have him as my special friend. As I sat with my eyes closed, I remembered that someone else also cared for him. I then had hope that Oro was alright. But again, the dark thoughts came that he had been taken away, harmed, or ... what? Like the waves pushing and pulling the seaweed and driftwood, so my thoughts swept between hope and despair for Oro and for myself. Then, I heard my name being called.

“Ernesto. Ernesto.”

I turned and looked around. A young man much older than I walked out from beside the house behind me. I jumped to my feet in surprise.

But he smiled at me and said, “I am Raúl. Do not be afraid, Ernesto. I am your friend and the friend of Oro.”

I looked at Raúl in astonishment. He was tall, taller than my father, and thin, with dark skin. He dressed in a long-sleeved dark brown patterned shirt and tan pants. How did he know my name and the name of Oro?

“I am the one who brought an old woman friend I know who lives in Colonia México to bind up the wounds of Oro. She said he was badly hurt, but that he would live if he was cared for. I have taken him to la cantina where I live. Come, we will go there now.”

I nodded but said nothing.

He led the way along the sand north to la cantina. As I walked beside Raúl, I wondered, Who was he? Why did he live in la cantina? Why had he helped Oro? After we had passed three of

the beach houses and reached a vacant space, I asked, "How do you know my name and the name of Oro?"

"I am paid to watch these houses when the owners are gone. I make only a token, but for now it is enough. I know all that happens here. It is my work. I live behind la cantina, as I have said. I help with the work there to pay for my room which is small, but I do not need a better one now."

I thought that he must be content to live as he did, without many cares or great responsibilities or hard work. I would learn that I was wrong about everything.

After we passed the vacant space and two more houses, Raúl said, "I saw the attack of the dogs on Oro." He paused. I could see anger on his face. "The man who owns the dogs is very bad, a smuggler of people, a *coyote*, who drifts back and forth across the border like an evil fog, sucking the blood from desperate people."

We walked silently toward la cantina. Then Raúl said, "I saw you rescue Oro, and I have heard you speak to him. That is how I know your name and his." He then apologetically said, "I could not let the coyote see me help you."

As we neared la cantina, he said, "I have seen you often, sitting on the sand, sketching. I have uncovered drawings you buried. Many are very good. Why do you bury them?"

I was surprised that he knew so much about me, yet I did not remember seeing him. "My father does not want me to draw. He thinks I waste my time."

"Oh?" said Raúl. "But I see that you draw anyway."

I felt that I must explain why I defied my father, even if I thought he was unreasonable. "I feel compelled to draw. I cannot help it. And I cannot explain it."

Raúl looked at me without expression. I could not tell if he understood and approved or disapproved. After a moment he said, "Oro was too weak to walk, so I carried him here." He pointed to a door behind la cantina that faced the ocean.

I thought Raúl must be very strong to have carried Oro so far, because Oro was a large dog. And I looked at Raúl with new respect.

The door facing the ocean opened into a wooden shed attached to the cantina building. La cantina was also made of wood with a roof that sloped from the front toward the rear where the shed was attached. The front cantina door faced east to the hills of Tijuana, beckoning customers from there. The door that Raúl entered had a much more pleasant view. It looked out at the ocean.

Inside the shed, cases of beer and liquor were stacked against the south wall. An old dirty white refrigerator stood along the outside, or east, wall of la cantina next to its back door. Against that wall on the other side of the door sat a table and two chairs. A crude bed of old blankets spread on a canvas cot lay against the north wall. At the foot of the bed lay Oro on his bed of cardboard covered by the old blanket.

“Oro,” I exclaimed. He looked up at me and thumped his tail against the blanket. I sat beside him and stroked his head.

“I could not bring Oro here until the coyote left,” said Raúl, kneeling down beside us. “Until now Oro was too weak for me to move him. But I watched him at the house so that he would be safe.”

Raúl sat on his bed and stroked the back of Oro. On the blanket, Oro looked first at Raúl and then at me. He was at peace. He was safe here.

As we sat in the shed, Raúl saw me looking around. He stood and paced the room. Pointing around, he said, “This is a temporary place for me, and the work I do is temporary. I have a plan to do better.” In silence, he clenched his jaw and tensed his muscles. He had determination on his face, as I have seen on the face of my father. He did not tell me his plan then, and I did not ask. But he would tell it to me soon.

“Where do you live, Ernesto?” he asked.

“Pancho Villa.”

“Pancho Villa? It is a long way along Calle Malinche. That can be a dangerous walk. There are gangs in Colonia México and Misión Sol. *Banda*, criminals, or *pandilla*, gangs. Who knows? But if the gangs catch you alone they will beat you or maybe do even worse.”

“I always run past those canyons. I run almost all the way along Calle Malinche.”

“The gang members are older than you. They can run faster. Why come so far just to draw?”

“Here, I am away from the city, from my home. Here, I am at peace. I can breathe.”

“Well, do not travel along that road after dark. You will be in much danger.”

For three years, I had run along that road at night without encountering any trouble, but I did not tell Raúl.

To emphasize his warning, he said, “Darkness is coming, Ernesto, and you must go. Oro will be safe here. You can see him tomorrow.”

I knew Oro would be safe, and I did not worry.

“Before you go,” Raúl continued. “Come and meet señor Tejada in la cantina. He will give you a small Coke, if I ask.”

The door into la cantina opened directly behind the bar. When I entered the room, I blinked to see in the darkness. La cantina had one room with a bar across the back and five round tables with chairs in the room in front of the bar. A door to *un baño* was in front of the bar on the north side. Everything was the color of wood. Even the windows in front were painted brown. Three men talked quietly at a corner table. Two were small dark young men dressed in rough jeans and plaid shirts. They wore scuffed, worn brown shoes. The other man was older, larger, with broad shoulders. He was dressed in brown slacks, a blue-patterned silk shirt, and brown shoes that reflected the light in the room.

Señor Tejada sat on a stool behind the bar where he appeared

to be doing nothing. Bottles of many shapes and sizes, some partly empty, lined shelves behind him. Beside the shelves, in a corner behind the bar, stood a large white refrigerator that held beer and Cokes.

“Raúl, how are you today? Come in. Who is this?” he asked, stepping from his stool. He did not seem much taller when he stepped from his stool, but he was very broad. His white shirt stretched at its buttons, and the sleeves fit like a second skin over his arms that were like trunks of trees. He had a great round head, made rounder looking by bushy black hair, and a wide smile that made his cheeks bulge.

Raúl introduced me to señor Tejada, who immediately asked, “Would you like a small Coke?” Then, without waiting for me to answer, he went to the refrigerator and brought Raúl and me each a bottle of Coke.

“Tell me, Raúl and Ernesto,” he asked, “what are you doing? Do you want something of José?”

Raúl told him that we wanted nothing. Then, he told him that I was the one who rescued Oro. A frown came upon the face of José Tejada as he looked at me and then at Raúl. “I have told Raúl the dog cannot stay. When he is recovered, he must go.” Raúl reassured him that he would care for and feed Oro and that Oro would cause him no trouble. Señor Tejada looked at us both again and then smiled his big smile, making his face round. “Alright, *muchachos*, but do not let him in la cantina. I have a watch boy and now a watchdog. That is good.” He paused. “I think it is good, maybe, but the watchdog is wounded and cannot even move. What kind of a watchdog is that?” He tilted his head back and roared a great laugh so that his face became rounder and red, and his whole body shook.

## CHAPTER 5

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“SOMEDAY, ERNESTO, you will draw a picture of me in front of a fine house in Chapúltepec, as you now do of your father,” Raúl said to me as he looked at the picture I was drawing. “And someday it will be so. I will have a home in Chapúltepec.”

Four weeks had passed since we first met and together began to care for Oro. At first, I was not at ease enough with Raúl to draw, but during the last week I had begun. That late afternoon, Raúl sat with me on the sand and watched as I sketched my father at Chapúltepec.

Almost every day since I met Raúl, I had returned to la playa to see him and Oro. After about a week, Oro could walk a little. A week later the three of us began to walk along the beach. At first, we walked very slowly and not very far, because Oro was not strong and limped badly. As days went by, his strength returned. He rapidly learned to walk with only three legs, until he was even running a little. Earlier that day, Oro ran toward the water as it receded, and then ran back toward the shore as the waves came crashing in. Once, I saw him put his wounded leg down to turn from a wave. Hardly ever did the water catch his feet. Oro was learning to run on three legs as other dogs do on four, and even used his fourth leg sometimes.

I set aside the sketch of my father and began another of Raúl in Chapúltepec. “How will you own a home in Chapúltepec?” I asked. “How will you become so wealthy?”

“I have a plan,” he said and then was silent.

I continued to sketch and waited for him to say more. I

thought that his plan must be to him as my drawing was to me — a secret for himself only. After many minutes of silence between us, I boldly asked, “What is your plan?”

He began to answer me slowly, cautiously, as though he could not trust me with what he said. “When I first came here with two friends from my village in Michoacán, I planned to go north with them to seek work and adventure. There was no work in our village or near it. My mother died when I was young, and my father sought others to raise my brothers, sisters, and me. We were spread among many villages and were no longer a family. I had nothing to keep me in that place. My friends and I heard from others that much money could be made in los Estados Unidos.”

He paused, stood, and paced in the sand in front of me. “When we came to Tijuana we learned of the high costs of coyotes and the difficulty and danger of crossing to el Norte alone. My friends were undeterred, but I saw opportunities here in Tijuana. So I stayed. My friends crossed one dark night. One succeeded, but the other was caught by the border police, la migra, and returned to Tijuana. My friend who was caught crossed again two nights later, and I have not heard from either of them.” He paused again and continued to pace. “Word from my village is that they are in Los Angeles.” Then he became silent. Could he have regretted his choice to remain in Tijuana? But I continued to sketch and made no sign that I questioned what he did.

“Work in Tijuana has not been easy to find,” he said. “Many seek work here. For now, I will work here at la cantina and la playa. I will save what money I can. I am learning to speak English. It is important for a businessman to speak English in Tijuana. The Norteamericano who stays in the house where Oro was sheltered and another are teaching me. I find it easy, and soon I will speak it well enough to work in el Norte, where I can earn much money.”

I looked up at him sharply. Had he not just told me that he did not go north because he saw opportunities in Tijuana?

He spoke again as though he read my thoughts. "I wish to work here, but I must have money for a business."

"How will you work in el Norte? Do you not need *una tarjeta*, a card, to work there? Or will you follow your friends?"

"There are ways. I have spent many hours listening to the men in la cantina talk of working there, and I know how to do it." He stopped pacing and looked down at me. "The two Norteamericanos who teach me English have told me that they will help me get a visitor permit so that I may make trips to el Norte to get them things they need. I suggested that to them, and I think they will want me to do it. When I am in los Estados Unidos, I will look around and find work for a day. I might stay for a few days and work. No one will know. That will not be a fast way to make money, working a day now and then, but the risks are not great. And soon, in two or three years, I will have money to buy a shop in Tijuana or a taxi. I do not know which."

Raúl stared out to sea. I thought that possibly its vastness reminded him of the long way he must go to complete his plan. He turned to me, his face serious, and said, "I could stay in el Norte after I receive a visitor permit to cross the border, but to stay like that is the act of a desperate man. I am not a desperate man. I am young, and I have no one to care for but myself. I can be patient."

He stopped pacing and sat beside me. "Do you remember those three men in la cantina the day you met señor Tejada?"

I nodded yes.

"They were desperate men. Two were from far to the south in México, and the other was a coyote, a smuggler of people, who would take them across the border for a price. That price was very high. Those men must work two years in México to earn it.

"Men, and sometimes women, come from México, and even from Central and South America, to work in el Norte. They are desperate. There is not enough work where they come from, or they are in danger there. Some even come without money. They



come first to Tijuana to find work or a way to go north. Sometimes, the men leave their families at home in their villages. Sometimes, they bring their families to Tijuana and live in paper houses. I have heard it all in la cantina. Many who try to cross the border are caught by la migra. Of those who are not caught at the border, many are caught in the cities as they work. Most often, they do not make much money. Some even lose money. Some even lose their lives. I will not do it that way. I am not desperate. I have time to get rich. And I wish to live here in México.” He looked at me with determination.

“Do some really die?” I asked.

“Yes, but not many who go from here to California, unless they cross to the east, where they face the dangers of the desert. To cross into Arizona, New México, and Texas is a different matter. I have heard men in la cantina speak of it.”

I already knew much of what Raúl told me about crossing the border. It was not possible to live in Tijuana and not know. But I knew little of the deaths and crossing into Arizona, New México, and Texas. “Why is it different to cross into those estados?” I asked.

“In Texas, one must first cross the Rio Bravo, which the Norteamericanos call the Rio Grande. To cross the Rio Bravo is not hard for one who knows where to go, I have heard. A boat or something to float on is needed. Sometimes, it is possible even to walk across. But most who cross must have a guide, a coyote, and that costs much money. Some of those who could not pay and try to cross alone have drowned. In some places in Texas, after crossing the river, and in Arizona and New México, they must walk across much land to find work in the cities. There are no cities in which to work, unless they go far to the north. I have heard that some men have died from bites of snakes while crossing the ranch lands. Many have died from lack of water, or suffocated in trucks used to smuggle them north to the cities. Much of this is not certain, though, because there is often no record of those who die, only

their bones in the desert. They are not heard of again, unless they were with a friend who survives and tells their story.”

“But in Tijuana we can cross the river before we come to the border,” I said.

“If the crossing is made to the east, that is correct. Here, west of the city, the river is on the other side. But there is a bridge. And there are cities, fields, and orchards in California where work can be found, so it is not as dangerous as those other places. That is why many who come to work in el Norte first come to Tijuana.”

“But I have heard of bandits,” I said, “men who rob those crossing the border. When I pass Colonia México or Misión Sol, I think of bandits. You have told me I must be careful there. But then I ask myself, Why would they want my few pesos?”

“Bandits would stop you and take your few pesos,” Raúl responded. After a moment he added, “Many who cross the border will lose their money to them, or to coyotes, or even to la migra, or the Méxicano border police.”

Raúl was silent after he talked about crossing the border, and I sketched to complete the drawing of him in front of a house in Chapúltepec. But I wanted to know more of his plan. “What kind of business will you buy, a taxi? You said maybe a taxi.”

“I do not know. Maybe I could start with a taxi. Then, buy another and another. Or maybe I will buy a small business. I will be careful not to get one with so much competition that I can make no money. I would not buy an upholstery shop or a garage, because there are already too many of them. Also, I will not sell pottery to the tourists.”

“Will you learn a trade?” I asked.

“I have no such plans except to learn about business. I could hire the tradesmen I need.”

I could see that Raúl had no definite plan, so I asked him no more questions. He had only a very general plan, and he would just begin to follow it. It was like a cloud that promises rain to the

desert, which even shows streaks of rain, but not a drop touches the earth.

Circumstances which he could not foresee would cause him to change his plan in a way he would never have considered.

I had now finished my drawing and showed it to him.

"It is very good, Ernesto," he said, and he smiled at me. "Come, it is getting late. Let us put it on the wall of my room before you go."

When we arrived at the shed, señor Tejada was picking up a case of beer to put in the refrigerator. His face was serious and not round with a smile. "It is Friday, and the Norteamericanos are already here," he said.

"Is that bad?" I asked. "Do they not bring much money?"

"Yes, but today they are very loud and rude. On some weekends my cantina is theirs. Come and see how it begins."

Raúl and I followed señor Tejada into la cantina. Many Norteamericanos were already there. At one table six men talked and laughed loudly. One banged on the table with his fist as he laughed. More occupied two other tables. A man at one of those tables yelled at señor Tejada in very bad Spanish, pointing at his empty glass and demanding more beer. Looking around, I suddenly felt a shiver up my back. At a corner table, sitting alone, the man who had the spotted dogs sipped a beer. I grabbed the arm of Raúl and pointed at the man. "That is the man whose dogs attacked Oro."

Raúl nodded. "I know."

"You know him?" I asked as we returned to the shed.

Raúl began to put the picture I had drawn over his bed and had his back to me. "Yes. He comes here often, and sometimes he brings his dogs from south of here, where he hunts for rabbits and coyotes."

"And dogs?"

"Yes, and dogs. He comes south from los Estados Unidos to seek men to work in businesses in el Norte. He is a coyote, a very bad man, as I told you."

“He hunts in México in two ways,” I said. “How is it that you know him?”

Raúl did not answer for a moment. Then, after taping the picture to the wall, he turned to me and said, “He has one of the beach houses. I told you I could not let him see me help Oro.” He paused. “He is one of the Norteamericanos who pays me and teaches me English.”

## CHAPTER 6

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THAT NIGHT when I left Raúl, I worried about him. How much did his plans depend upon that man who he called evil, who hunted with spotted dogs? I would think of that man during many of the following months. But for a while he left my mind, because in less than a week Oro returned with me from la playa to Pancho Villa, and I thought of little else except him. We walked together up Avenida J, which is a broad and busy boulevard that climbs the hills of Pancho Villa from the north to the south. Many small shops of differing types, shapes, and sizes lined the avenida. I waved at señor Campos as he straightened the rows of his vegetables. Old and with white hair, he had bent over his vegetables for so long that he could no longer stand up straight. The day was hot, and I wished that I could eat many of the fruits he sold to stop my thirst.

We passed by my favorite shop, the bakery of the Cordovas. I could never pass by it without wanting to sample the *pan dulces*, sweet breads. The Cordovas, both small and round, always smiled. I thought that if I owned a bakery, I would be round and smiling, too.

At the grocery store señor Silva stood tall and thin, talking, as he always did, to some shoppers. And we passed the shop of señora Rosales who sold clothes for women. Her shop was of no interest to me, and I could see that Oro also had no interest in it. And as usual, men crowded around the front of la cantina. The nose of Oro sniffed the air when we passed the butcher shop of señor Aceves. And I had to restrain him from following the meat pie cart of señora Costa.

That day Avenida J was very busy with cars; vendors with pushcarts filled with meat pies, pastries, candy, and drinks; and people in the street. I decided to take Oro away from there, away from all the activity, and show him my school. So we left the boulevard and climbed the hill to the east. My school, a building three floors high, stood on that hill. From the north classroom windows, I could see even to los Estados Unidos. The old school, built of stone, appeared gray. It was one of the government schools for the youth of Tijuana. Behind the school was a field of only dirt where we played *fútbol*. In front, Oro and I rested under large trees that provided shade and cooled the rooms. For a while, I lay on grass with Oro at my side, looking at nothing and saying nothing. We were at peace.

Later, as we rose to leave and go to my home, two friends saw me. They attended school with me and sometimes we worked together. They were part of a group who banded together when we went into the city. If we went alone, we could be attacked and beaten by roaming neighborhood gangs. All during my journey from la playa to Pancho Villa, I had felt nothing but pride to have Oro at my side. But Jesus called out.

“Ernesto, where did you get that limping dog? He looks half dead. Did he follow you from the cemetery?”

“What is that creature with only three legs?” asked Paco. “Can he walk straight, or will he walk in circles?”

“With one hind leg up he is always ready to piss,” said Jesus.

They followed us, pointing and laughing at Oro. I ignored them and reached down and patted Oro on the head. He looked up at me, and I could tell that he took no notice of their taunts. As we neared my house, the two saw the dignity of Oro, and when they saw that their taunts did no good, they began to ask questions.

“Is this three-legged dog yours?”

“Where did you get such a dog?”

“What will you do with him?”

“Will he fetch our *beisbol* when we hit it too far?” they laughed.

I did not answer them. I did not want to tell them how I found him. I told them only that he followed me home.

When I reached my house, my father was already there. He had finished work, and I could see that he was tired. When he saw Oro, he shouted, “What is this dog you bring home? Do we not have enough to care for here already without a dog? Send him away.”

“Oro is my friend, and I cannot send a friend away,” I replied.

My father became very angry and ordered me to send my “useless three-legged dog” away. Anger toward my father welled up within me, but outwardly I stayed calm. To act angry toward my father would yield a beating. My first thought was to take Oro back to Raúl at la playa, but I knew that Raúl could not keep him.

While I spoke with my father, some of the Garcia children, our neighbors, gathered around Oro and began to pet him. He poked his nose at the youngest, Alicia, nuzzling her until she giggled.

With the Garcia children and my two friends around Oro and me, I stood outside my house, not knowing what to do. I began walking down the hill with no destination in mind, when my friends who taunted Oro stopped me. Jesus said, “We have overheard what your father said, and we will help you care for this dog. I will also talk to the *Villaistas*. You know my brother is in the gang. They will help.”

“How can I believe you when only minutes ago you taunted him? Why should I trust you now?” I asked. Secretly, I did not want to share him with anyone, except Raúl.

“We see that he is a fine dog and friendly, even with children,” said Paco.

As we sat by the side of the road and talked about Oro, I could see that they were sincere. They said that their teasing was not serious, and I believed them. We decided how to buy some bones from the butcher, and get scraps from our homes and the neighbors

and on places where he could sleep. Possibly the Villaistas could help with places to sleep.

Soon, Oro became a citizen of Pancho Villa, and everyone knew him. But he stayed close to my house. He became the special friend of the Garcías, especially the two youngest children, Julio, who was six, and Alicia, who was five. Julio wrestled with him, and they growled at each other. Julio even tried to ride on his back, but Oro always evaded him. When Julio tried to grab Oro, to jump on his back, Oro pushed him away and knocked him down. Oro then pushed his nose at Julio and did not stop until Julio became weak with laughter.

Oro acted much differently toward Alicia, showing great gentleness. They would sit together in the shade of the Garcia house for long periods of time. Alicia would pet Oro and tell him all of her feelings. Oro would look at her and listen to all she said and smile at her with a thumping of his tail.

In July, two weeks after Oro came to Pancho Villa, I became very ill with a fever. It was not a good time to become ill, because many tourists were in Tijuana and much money could be earned. There is little I remember of the five days I passed with illness and fever. I had such wild and strange dreams, so unimaginable that I could not even draw the scenes, although I tried to do so later.

When the fever had passed and I awoke, I found Oro lying on the floor by my bed with his head facing the open door that divided my room from the front room. At first, I was not surprised to see him. He had been in my dreams. His presence seemed natural and expected. When I became more awake and realized that Oro was really in my room, I told him that he should leave before my father saw him. But he only banged his tail on the floor and turned to lick my hand.

My mother heard my voice as I spoke to Oro, and she appeared from the front room. She looked in at me with a worried face, but



she smiled when she saw me petting Oro. She came over to sit beside me on my bed, and as she did, my sister, Teresa, appeared at the door. I had lost all account of time and was surprised to see her. I thought she would be at Chapultepec, but instead, this day and the previous one were days she did not work. Then, my mother told me that I had been ill for so long.

I asked my mother and my sister why my father had permitted Oro to be with me in the house. My mother answered, "Because he had no choice. This yellow dog would not leave you. Your father pulled and pushed him and tried to lift him. He shouted at him, but in a whisper so that you would not be disturbed. But the dog would not go. He did not snap, but he growled at your father and braced his legs against moving. This dog would not leave you, and his growl told everyone that he would not go. He knew that he must watch you. Your father, with much grumbling, finally stopped trying to move him from your room."

"He growled at almost everyone who came into your room," said Teresa, "but not our mother. He even growled at me when I first came, but only at first. He always growled at our father," she said with a smile. I smiled, too, to think of Oro growling at my father, who could do nothing about it in his own house. Even today, when I think of my father trying to put Oro from the house, I smile to myself to imagine my father so perplexed.

"He growled," my mother continued, "even at señora García, who he knows, when she first came to see you and help take care of you. And she is such a kind lady. But his growl was only a warning. When he saw that a visitor was a friend, he stopped growling and only watched."

"I am curious that he did not growl at your friend," said Teresa.

"What friend?" I asked.

"He said his name is Raúl, and he seemed to know the dog."

"We are friends," I said. "Raúl, the dog, and I."

"He gave the dog water and food," said my mother. "The dog

would not take food or water from anyone else. And Raúl took him outside to relieve himself, but the dog returned immediately to lie beside your bed.”

By that time I had come more to my senses and sat up on my bed. Oro stood, stretched, and turned around to face me. He looked me in the eyes and laid his head on my lap, and I stroked his head and his broad back. After a few minutes, he turned and left the room. He knew that I was alright, and that he was not needed anymore.

As I watched Oro leave, my mother said, “I never saw him leave you except when Raúl took him outside, but he must have left you at other times for short periods. He only seemed at ease when your friend Raúl came to see you. Tell me about this dog and your friend, Raúl.”

I told her and Teresa about the day at la playa when I first saw Oro, about the attack by the spotted dogs, and about the care Raúl and I gave Oro.

After I had finished, my mother left the room to get some food for me, because I was very hungry. My sister remained. “Tell me more about Raúl,” she asked casually, as if simply making talk, but I knew she liked Raúl. She is my sister, and I knew her ways. I told her only a little about Raúl, because that was all I knew. But I did not tell her of his plan, because that was not for me to tell.

Within one week, I had recovered enough from the illness to seek work. Summer was here, and I could make money on the streets of Tijuana. Norteamericano tourists came in large numbers to the city and to the beaches farther south in Baja California. Mostly, they came to the city to buy and to argue over prices. From April until October there were many tourists, but the summer months from June until September were the best for earning money.

Many other boys also tried to earn money from the tourists. Some of them had no homes at all and took great risks to make money. Some were thieves, which made tourists and merchants wary of all of us. I had much competition for work.

Also, there were restrictions in the central city, where tourists went, against certain work, such as shining shoes. So, when I shined shoes, I also watched for the police. But I made money at many different jobs. Sometimes, I opened taxi doors or washed car windows at the border. Sometimes, I helped in a shop where there was much business or ran errands for merchants I knew. Usually, I earned about one dollar American a day, and sometimes more. Some days, though, I earned nothing. For three weeks after my illness, I worked and did not go to la playa. When Oro and I returned to la playa, Raúl was not there. I had seen him once at my house when Teresa was home. "I look for other work," he said with no explanation.

After another week, Oro and I returned to la playa again. The hour was late and the sun was a red ball falling into clouds off shore. Again, Raúl was not there. As I looked around la cantina, I saw señor Tejada standing outside the front door. He was smiling, and his face was round.

"Is your business good?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Some Norteamericanos are here. They come here often and are not loud and rude." Then his face lost its smile and he said, "And a coyote with his *pollos*, chickens. He will guide them north tonight."

"Have you seen Raúl?" I asked. "I have seen him only once in many weeks."

The face of señor Tejada stayed serious. "He seeks work in the city. He looks for it day and night but has little success. I see him only early in the morning or late at night. Sometimes, I do not see him for days, but I know he sleeps here."

"But why would he seek such work so suddenly?"

“Ah!” he said with a smile. “He has told me of a beautiful girl he sees. One who works in Chapúltepec.” He winked at me, and his face was very round.

## CHAPTER 7

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AS THE SUMMER GREW OLD, weeks passed between times I saw Raúl. We met for only a moment on a Monday evening in late August, when he visited Teresa at our house. I saw him speak with my father, but I did not hear what they said.

Late in the afternoon on a September day, I saw him on Calle Malinche as I returned with Oro from la playa to Pancho Villa. He was coming back to la playa after seeking work in Tijuana. Oro jumped on him and wagged his tail. Raúl knelt down and rubbed Oro on his back and stroked his head.

“Are you finding work?” I asked.

Raúl stood and looked at me with a downcast face. “Only a little here and there.”

“Why are you now seeking work in Tijuana, when you told me there was little work to be found there?”

“I need to make more money.” He said no more about work. After a few more minutes of saying little and petting Oro, we went our separate ways.

I wished to see Raúl more often, but I knew he was putting his plan to work.

During that time, Oro was my constant companion in summer after work and later in fall after school and work. He went with me to la playa where I sketched. I was pleased that he was always by my side, to show my sketches to, to talk to, and to run with along the sand.

One Friday afternoon in late September, Oro and I came to la playa, where I began to sketch, but Oro would not let me. He

pushed his nose in my paper, and then he jumped on me, until I wrestled and growled with him on the sand.

I rolled him over on his back and scratched his stomach until his good hind leg twitched. When I stopped, he jumped on me again and knocked me down, where he held me and licked my face. I laughed and could not stop, until I pushed him away. I tried to sketch, but again Oro pushed his nose at my paper.

I put my paper down, and we ran south, following the edge of the water as it moved in and out along the sand. When Oro ran ahead, I caught him from behind and wrestled him to the sand, where we rolled over and over. When the sun almost touched the clouds in the distant horizon, and the air became colder, we turned back and walked quietly beside each other.

When we neared the beach houses, the sun was only a circle of orange, partly hidden by clouds. I thought of Raúl and wished that he could be with us. I wondered if he succeeded in finding work that day.

Suddenly, I felt uneasy and looked behind me. There, walking along the edge of the water, about two hundred meters away, was the Norteamericano with his spotted dogs. A sense of dread overwhelmed me. I looked at Oro, but he seemed unaware of their presence.

I looked quickly for a place we could run to for safety. The beach houses nearby offered no protection. La cantina was too far ahead. On the sand to my right lay pieces of wood beside a fire pit. I walked over and picked up the largest piece. Partly burnt, it reached from the sand to my waist. I continued to walk, carrying the piece of wood on my shoulder. I had gone only a few steps when I looked back. The man raised his hand, yelled a command, and the ugly spotted dogs raced for Oro and me. I knew that this attack must not be like the one before. I must try to stop the dogs from attacking Oro.

I began to run with Oro trotting at my side. He seemed

unaware of the attacking beasts. We would never reach la cantina before the dogs would be upon us. There was nothing to do but to confront them on the beach.

As they came within twenty meters, I turned, but Oro still looked the other way. The largest dog was in the lead. He raced toward Oro, but I stepped in front of him and swung the board with all my strength. He leaped aside, and my club struck only air.

The next beast followed right behind the first. This time, I did not swing so hard, but carefully aimed my blow. I struck the dog against his forelegs. He tumbled into the sand, flipping on his back. Before he could rise, I struck a hard blow against his head. He lay still.

While I struck the second dog, the first, which I had missed with my club, lunged at the remaining good hind leg of Oro. But Oro only lured the dog to attack his leg. As dust whirled in the summer fields, Oro spun around to attack the spotted dog. A roar of growls and snapping teeth rose above the sound of crashing waves. Sand flew up, as they charged together. But where the spotted dog had attacked the leg of Oro, the jaws of Oro found the throat of the ugly spotted dog. With a twist, Oro threw the dog on his back. The dog struggled, kicking his legs, but Oro held tightly at his throat. Then, the spotted dog lay still.

I had just felled the second beast, when the third attacked, lunging toward Oro. Again, I swung my club, striking the left shoulder of the dog. He howled and tumbled in the sand. I raised my club to strike him again, but stopped when I saw that he struggled and could not get up. His yellow eyes were bewildered, and he howled in pain as he writhed in the sand.

The two remaining dogs did not attack, but circled Oro and me. As they circled, I always placed myself between one of them and Oro, while at the same time I watched the other one. They snarled and showed their fangs. Twice, I swung my club at one that came too close, but each time the beast jumped back to continue snarling and

watching for an opportunity to attack. All this time that I circled around, Oro held the throat of the largest spotted dog.

While I circled, the Norteamericano walked toward us, but did not hurry to the aid of his dogs. Did he not care about them? I wondered.

The two dogs I struck recovered enough to stand. The first one, dazed, stood shaking his head. The other, his left foreleg tucked under him, struggled back to his master, who now approached us.

He was a large man, heavy and tall. He had wide shoulders, and his stomach stuck out large in front of him. Black stubble grew from his face. From the size of his belly and the redness of his face, he appeared to spend much time drinking beer in la cantina. He walked with his back straight, and his arms swung in long arcs as if he were marching. He stopped about ten meters from me, brushed black hair from his black eyes that stared menacingly at me. Then he looked at his dogs without sympathy and yelled a command in English.

The two dogs that circled about Oro and me walked to their master slowly with their tails between their legs, joining the one that limped. The one that I struck in the head shook his head again. The command seemed to come slowly to his brain. He took wobbly steps toward his master, his head hung low, and he shook it with each step.

After I watched the beast with the shaking head stagger toward his master, I turned to see Oro release the large dog that I thought he had killed with a bite to the throat. Instead, the beast slowly turned over and rose to his feet. His head hung low, and, staring up at Oro, he snarled. Oro bristled, growled, and moved toward him. The beast placed his tail between his legs and walked slowly toward his master, glancing back at Oro.

The man came closer to me, his dogs bunched behind him. I raised my club to my shoulder, while Oro moved to stand by my right side. The man glared down at me. Meanness flashed in



his eyes, which were laced with red like the web of a spider. He appeared to have gone many nights without sleep. He pointed at me and said in perfect Spanish, "You have wounded my dogs to protect this homeless, useless mongrel. I will be watching you and your friend." Then, he spoke some words in English that sounded like angry threats. Listening carefully, I wished I had studied English, but I did not understand what he said. If I had understood the meaning of his words, I may have prevented future trouble. And what friend? Oro? Raúl? Who else?

After he spoke, he turned and marched away toward the beach houses, his dogs following meekly. I would see only one of the dogs again, and to my misfortune I would see the Norteamericano again.

Oro and I stood watching, until he disappeared between the beach houses. Then, we sat down facing the water and the place where the sun had disappeared. I looked at Oro in the faint light that remained. I still saw the look of innocence in his eyes, but now I saw no ignorance or confusion there.

I petted him all over to see if he had any wounds. When I found none, I sat quietly until the light had almost disappeared. Oro then poked at my shoulder with his nose. I could not ignore him, even though I tried to push him away. He knew that we must go. But first I wanted to look for Raúl, to tell him about the attack. We walked slowly from the beach to la cantina, but Raúl was not in the shed. We walked to the front of la cantina to find señor Tejada standing in the doorway. The light over the door shone on his face, shiny with perspiration.

"I look for Raúl," I said. "I came to tell him of another attack by the spotted dogs." I then told señor Tejada of the fight.

The face of señor Tejada became very grave, and he said, "That Norteamericano is very bad. You have made a bad enemy." He looked into the darkness. "That man offers work in el Norte, but trouble waits across the border." He then looked at me and said, "Raúl is not here."

“Does he find work in the city?”

“No.” Señor Tejada shook his head and looked to the ground. “Only two days ago he went north.”

“Then he must have received a visitor permit,” I said.

“No! Caramba!” He looked at me as if I had no brains.

“But his plan was to get a visitor permit with help from the Norteamericanos.”

“A seed to give empty hope planted by the Norteamericanos, yielding nothing. One more of their games from which to tell stories in la cantina.”

“How did he go? With a coyote?”

“No. He had no money for a coyote. He said he knew a way.” Señor Tejada shook his head again.

I was astounded. “But why would he stray from his plan of work in Tijuana and go north?”

“He tried for many weeks to find work in Tijuana, but there was little.”

“Could he not wait and try more?”

“He became impatient. He said he needed to make more money because of the girl who works in Chapúltepec. Her father does not approve of him, because he does not have better work. The father of the girl guards her well. But, of course, you know that.” He looked at me kindly.

“A girl,” I said. “But why should he change his plan for a girl, even Teresa?”

Again señor Tejada looked at me as if I had no brains. “She is very beautiful, he tells me.” He shrugged his shoulders and winked at me, but he did not smile. “I keep the room for him. He will return.”

He quietly stared to the north and then toward Tijuana. As he looked south toward the beach houses, he said, “The Norteamericano comes. You should go.”

I turned to look at the beach houses. In the distance, the

Norteamericano was marching toward la cantina. Quickly, I slipped from the light into darkness. With Oro at my side, I ran to Calle Malinche and began walking fast toward Pancho Villa.

When we reached the canyon of Colonia México, the words of Raúl urged me to run. “Calle Malinche can be dangerous. Do not go there after dark. The gangs could catch you and ...” In July my friend Paco was on Calle Malinche not far from Colonia México in daylight when he was caught and badly beaten by the Colonias. The Villaistas retaliated and beat some boys from Colonia México. Walking alone along Calle Malinche had become more perilous since then. Raúl said he would speak to his friends in Colonia México and Misión Sol about me. So far, I have had no trouble, but I am very watchful. I run past those two places.

I had just begun to run when Oro stopped and stood in my path. He would not let me pass. I tried to run around him, but he would not let me. He pushed his nose at me and moved me to the side of the road, where he sat down and listened. I sat silently beside him but heard nothing.

The clouds had moved in from the ocean and shut out the light of the moon and stars. I could see nothing but the lights of Colonia México on the hills to the south.

We sat quietly for what seemed to me to be an hour, but it may not have been so long. In that time, a few cars passed, but their lights showed me nothing of what Oro sensed. In such a dark place so close to the border fence, I imagined many things—desperate men crossing the border, even men watching Oro and me as we sat by the side of the road. And I thought of Paco, who was beaten, and Raúl, who was now on the other side.

Finally, Oro rose, and we continued, first walking, then running, along the road. We jogged until we reached Misión Sol, where we ran again. When we reached the place in the road where it turns south, with the lights of Pancho Villa ahead, the sound and the searchlight of a Norteamericano border police helicopter

passed to the north of us, flying low along the border fence. It moved out away from the fence into the distance and stood over one place. I watched it for a while as it moved slowly north. Then, across the border, lights of cars appeared, moving to the place where the helicopter hovered. I knew then that a coyote had led his pollos across the border where Oro had stopped me. Or perhaps it was *conejos*, rabbits, that crawled under the fence. Whoever they were, they had not gone far that night. They would be returned to Tijuana tomorrow, and perhaps on another night they would try again to go north.

Raúl must have found a way north, because he had not returned after two days. But he did not know el Norte. How well would he do there? I wondered.

I looked down at Oro. "Let us hope that Raúl prospers in el Norte," I said. He looked at me and wagged his tail. "I now know why you stopped me." I knelt down to hug him about the neck for keeping me from the path of desperate men.

With Raúl gone, I felt emptiness, and Oro, who was our mutual bond, was even more a friend. After all these many years, how can I tell you of my friend, my great yellow, furry friend, Oro? How can I sketch him for you? How can one draw friendship or loyalty or patience? How can I draw joy in work or joy in doing nothing? How can I sketch a nudge with a wet nose or a nip on the foot to guide my path? How can I draw warmth on a cold night, a wet tongue that says, "Hello, how are you?" or a wagging tail that says, "I am so happy to see you"? How can I draw an all-night watch without any demands in return? And what of demands? To be scratched on the head or petted on the back or tickled on the stomach until the legs twitch. To go for a walk along the beach and not sit. And a little food sometimes.

How can I show you the eyes of my friend which were windows to his heart? How can I draw these things for you? I who wished in my youth, more than all else, to put on paper what

I saw and felt? Now, with diminished skills, I cannot. I do not know if it can be done. How can one draw love? I could not even with a million strokes of charcoal, pastel or brush, or with as many drawings, describe even the smallest part of the spirit of Oro. I wonder now, and I always will, at the grace of God that brought me such a friend.

## CHAPTER 8

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ABOUT FOUR WEEKS LATER, Raúl returned on a bus provided by la migra. He looked tired and defeated when I saw him at la playa. He was so downcast; he had not yet seen Teresa. Oro, Raúl, and I walked along the sand, and I told him of the fight with the spotted dogs. He did not smile or show pride in Oro as I expected. He did not say anything, but appeared to think of other things.

We sat on the sand and faced the glow behind the clouds that was the setting sun. A cold breeze blew in from the ocean. I zipped up my sweatshirt and began to sketch the view I recalled from my school window that looks into los Estados Unidos.

“How was your work in el Norte?” I asked.

“It did not go well.” Raul shivered from the cold. “I worked only one day a week in the garden of one of the Norteamericanos who stays at a beach house here at la playa. He has a fine house, but no better than many in Chapultepec. On other days, I stood with many others on street corners waiting for Norteamericanos to drive by and request workers. There were many of us seeking work ...” He stared at the ocean and said no more.

“Will you go to Chapultepec?” I asked with a smile.

He glanced distressfully at me and spoke to the sea. “For what purpose? What money I made I spent on food and a place to sleep. Sometimes, I had little food and slept under trees.” He shook his head. “No, I will not go to Chapultepec or to your house. I made no money. I must find work ... good work, work to earn enough that I can save money. Some of those I met in el Norte went there

only for adventure. For others with families to support, it was serious business. But there were too many of us for the work.” He laid back, put his hands behind his head, and looked at the clouds above. “I must find another way. If I could work there steadily, I could make much money. In two days, I made more money than in one or two weeks here in Tijuana. I must make contacts with people who can provide such work for me.”

I had finished my drawing and showed it to Raúl and Oro. Raúl sat up, brushed sand from his shirt, and said it was good. Oro thought it was good also, because he banged his tail on the sand.

Raúl asked, “Do you ever sketch your mother or sister?”

I said, “Yes, I had, a few times.” And I began to sketch my mother at work in our house.

I had only begun the drawing when Raúl asked, “Would you make a drawing of your sister?”

I looked at him, but he looked away. Without comment, I took another piece of paper, the best I had brought with me, and began drawing a picture of my sister. I drew only her face and shoulders. I took time to draw her in as much detail as I could. When I finished, I gave the drawing to Raúl, who studied it carefully.

“It is good, Ernesto. It is much as I remember her. But her smile and her sparkle are hard to capture on merely a piece of paper such as this.”

I did not feel offended when he said that, because it was true. Teresa was always cheerful and brightened a room she entered. How does one show that? Maybe I could have drawn the sun at her shoulder, or surrounded her head with light, and colored the drawing with yellows and oranges and a little red.

As the glow in the sky disappeared, the air turned even colder, and we returned to the shed behind la cantina. Raúl placed the picture of Teresa above his bed next to the one I had drawn of him in Chapultepec.

I turned to leave the shed and return to Pancho Villa when

Raúl said that he would go with me. Perhaps seeing only a drawing of Teresa was not enough for him.

As he put on a light jacket, I said, "You changed your mind? A short visit to Chapúltepec?"

Raúl did not answer, but gave me a look that stopped me from asking further questions.

The days had become short, and, although the hour was early, the sky had turned dark with clouds. As we walked away from la playa, the clouds dissipated into a mist that revealed faint light from a quarter moon. We walked without speaking along Calle Malinche, until we reached the canyon of Colonia México, when I started to run. But Raul stopped me. "There is no need," he said. "I know the people of Colonia México. We are safe here."

When we came near to the place where the canyon faces the border, Oro stopped us as he had with me earlier. I pulled Raúl to the side of the road, where Oro guided us, and whispered to Raúl of the other time that Oro had done this.

We sat by the roadside for only a short time when we heard a scuffling sound ahead, followed by a muffled cry. We saw and heard nothing for a few minutes. Then, in the lights of an approaching car fifty meters ahead, we saw the shapes of men running south across the road in the direction of Colonia México.

"La migra has frightened los conejos," I whispered to Raúl. "Those who would go north have returned."

After the car passed, we waited for a short time. Then Oro stood and continued to walk along the road. But after fifty meters, he ran toward the border fence and disappeared in the darkness.

We ran after him to the fence where we found a large hole cut in the wire, so that a man could easily pass through it. We called to Oro, but he did not answer or return. When we stopped calling, we heard a faint sound of a man groaning. Then Oro returned, but he would not come through the fence hole. He knew nothing of borders. He turned back and whined for us to follow him.



Raúl hesitated for only a moment, then stepped through the hole. I followed closely, although I felt very apprehensive. I knew I was in a place I should not be, and I felt as if many eyes were watching me from the darkness. But I had only a little time to be worried, for Oro led Raúl and me across barren dirt toward the sound we heard.

The dim light from the quarter moon shining behind the misty clouds guided our steps. We walked down a slight hill, and then Oro stopped beside a ditch. There, a small man lay on his back with his legs pulled up. He was dressed in old jeans and jacket, clothes of a villager. One shoe was gone. His jacket was open, and he held his left side. Raúl knelt beside the man. I followed and stood, looking down at him. The man shook his head, his face contorted in a grimace. Over and over he said, “No money, no money ...”

“We mean no harm. We are here to help you,” said Raúl. To me he said, “I have seen this man in la cantina. He has come a long way, from south of México in Guatemala. He said that he and his son were in danger in their own country because of war there. This man fled with his son to México so that they would not be forced to fight. He said that he needed work and wanted to go to los Estados Unidos. He sought a guide, a coyote, but he said he had no money to pay. I do not think those in la cantina believed that he had no money.”

“I have no money,” said the man softly, no louder than the sound of his breath.

The man had just spoken when Oro growled, bristled, and stalked slowly into the darkness. We heard him growl and feared la migra. Oro appeared again, still bristling and growling. “*Silencio!*” commanded Raúl. But Oro continued to growl.

From the darkness stepped a boy about my age but smaller, thinner. He held a small stick and a knife. Oro circled him,

growling, but did not attack. "Get away from my father, and take this dog, or I will kill him."

"We help your father," said Raúl. "Oro, come." Oro came to Raúl, but stood by him facing the boy. "Your father is badly wounded, by a knife, I think. We cannot leave him here. We must carry him to the other side and find help. How did this happen?"

The boy slowly, warily, joined us. "Some men agreed to show us the way north, but when we crawled through the fence, they immediately attacked us. My father said for me to run. I should have remained with him. Together, we might have fought them off." He pulled at his clothes in his distress.

"I think you both would have been wounded," said Raúl. "Your father is a brave man. Come, help me carry him, but we must be careful."

Raúl put one arm under the shoulders of the man and the other under his legs and lifted him. The boy and I stood opposite and helped to carry, but I felt little of the weight. Oro led the way, as we slowly carried the man up a slight rise to the fence. We watched each place where we put our feet and tried to step carefully without jarring him. He remained silent and refrained from any signs of pain, except the grimace, until near the fence where we slipped, and he cried out and shook his head from side to side. It was there that I felt a warm dampness on my sweatshirt. Again, the man groaned when we lifted him through the hole in the fence, repeating over and over, "I have no money."

"Father, I am Felix." The boy spoke in Spanish. "These men help us."

We laid the man by the side of the road on a patch of dried grass.

"Ernesto, you must run for help," said Raúl. "I will stay here with the man and his son. We will try to stop a passing car. Oro will stay with us."

"I will go for my father," I said and ran toward Pancho Villa.

“No, Ernesto,” called Raúl. “Go to la cantina. It is closer. José will make a telephone call.”

I ran fast to la cantina. When the first car passed by me, I saw that blood covered my sweatshirt, and I ran even faster. I wondered if the car would stop for Raúl. I wondered the same thing again, when a second car passed by me.

When I reached la cantina, I burst through the front door, ran past the patrons to the bar, behind which stood señor Tejada. My breath was gone, and I could not speak. I pointed to my sweatshirt and said, “Man hurt ... Calle Malinche ... Raúl there ... with him ... need help... .” Then, with a few breaths, my words came more easily. “He is un conejo ... wounded by bandits... .”

Señor Tejada did not wait for me to say more. He picked up his telephone and began to make a call. Before he finished, I said, “I must return to Raúl.” I turned and ran through la cantina, ignoring the stares of those who sat at the tables, and pushed through the door into the darkness.

When I approached the place where Raúl was, a police car slowed and stopped. Raúl walked over to the car and spoke with the policemen. When he led the officers to the side of the road, Raúl saw me. He started to come to me, but one of the policemen took him back to the police car. I went to Raúl, who said, “Do not look, Ernesto. I think the man has died.”

“Where is ....?”

Raúl put his finger to his lips.

The policeman, a tall, lean man about the age of my father, said, “Stay here by the car,” and he joined his partner, who knelt by the Guatemalan.

I felt greatly saddened that the man had died, and looked cautiously around for the boy, but I could not see him.

When the policemen returned to their car, I felt apprehensive. They called for an ambulance and then began to question Raúl and me. We explained how Oro had led us to the wounded man, and

we brought him back across the border. We said nothing of his son. But they looked at us suspiciously and asked questions as though we had killed the man. In time, another police car arrived. We told the story again to two more policemen. The four officers stood to the side and talked among themselves.

“I could stop no cars,” Raúl whispered to me. “I could not help him.” His face had a sad, defeated look. This was not the confident Raúl I first met months before. This was Raúl, who had met failure again and was now facing an accusation of murder. “I do not trust the police,” he whispered when he saw the policemen break from their discussion. The one who first spoke to us went to his car and made a call, while another brought us to the second car and asked us to repeat our story.

The one who made the telephone call returned to us. “I have talked with José Tejada. I know him. He is an honorable man. He made the call to me about the attack by the bandits. He said that you” — he pointed at me — “ran to la cantina to report the attack. And you” — he pointed at Raúl — “live behind la cantina and work for him. I have seen you there. José defends you. He said, ‘Would a criminal report his own crime?’” A slight smile formed at his mouth.

I tried hard not to smile, to think that José Tejada spoke to his policeman friend as if he had no brains.

“For now I believe your story,” said the officer, and he took our names and addresses. When he stopped writing, he looked at Oro and at us. “There have been other reports of bandits from Colonia México preying on immigrants. This dog may have saved you from serious harm.”

After the questioning, Raúl and I, with Oro beside us, stood away from the cars, waiting. Raúl whispered to me, “José gives drinks to that tall policeman and some others. He says it is a business arrangement. If he has trouble, he can call them and they will come, but I do not trust the police. If the accusations had

continued, I would have had to produce the boy as a witness to our innocence, but I did not want to do that. I have hidden him away from the road. If he were here, the police would take him away and send him back to Guatemala. He is not safe there.” He looked again at the police cars. “I will ask the police if we may go. Then, I must go to the boy.”

We returned to the police, who were standing by one of their cars. Raúl told them that he wished to return home. He said he had to rise early for work the next day. The policemen conferred, saying that we could ride with them after the ambulance arrived. But Raúl said that we would walk.

As we prepared to leave, the ambulance came and *los medicos* looked over the Guatemalan.

Raúl did not go with me to Pancho Villa as he had started to do that night, but turned to go to la playa. I walked with him a short way. With the cars behind us, he said again, “I will go to the boy now. That man died to save his son, but what will become of his son now? I will talk with him about what to do.” He then looked back at the cars and ambulance. “The Colonias did not do this. I know many of them. They fight and do other small crimes, but they would not do this. This killing has been the work of a very bad coyote gang. Go home now, while the police are here.”

I watched Raúl walk slowly along the road with Oro by his side. He disappeared from the lights of the cars and the flashes from the photographs being taken by the police and *los medicos*.

I walked by the side of the road past the police cars and ambulance. Soon they passed me on their way to the city as I continued to walk to Pancho Villa. I knew my father would yell at me for being late, and I was in no hurry to be confronted by him. I touched the front of my sweatshirt and felt the stiffness of the dried blood. Again, the picture returned of the Guatemalan, lying in the ditch, knees pulled up, shaking his head. I could see again his grimace. I could feel the warm moisture of his blood, of his

life leaving him. I could not shut it from my mind. And his son, in the agony of helplessness so far from family with no place to go, burned another vision in my mind. I wondered, What would become of him?

“Why are you late? Where have you been?” my father yelled from the table where he sat with my mother.

“To see Raúl. We were returning ... .”

“What is that on your sweatshirt?” asked my mother.

“Blood.”

“Are you hurt?” she asked, putting her hand to her face.

“No.”

“Raúl?”

“No. We were returning to the city ... .”

“Raúl is back?” asked my father. “How long?”

“Not long. Three days.”

“Has he seen Teresa?”

“No. We were going ... .”

“The blood?”

“We were walking along Calle Malinche from la playa to the city when Oro stopped us at the canyon of Colonia México.” I then told them the story of the Guatemalan.

My parents were quiet after I finished telling what happened.

Then my mother said, “Give me your sweatshirt. I will clean it with cold water and soap.” She took the sweatshirt and said, “I do not want you to go along that road. It is dangerous.”

“Only at night,” I said. “And I was with Raúl and Oro.”

My father said nothing. I expected him to forbid me to go to la playa, but he did not. Instead, he asked, “How did Raúl return?”

I knew then that he was thinking about Teresa and Raúl. “La migra,” I answered.

“Did he do well?”

“I do not ... think so. Perhaps he will talk with you.”

“Mmm ... Perhaps.” He was silent for a moment. “Your mother has saved some food for you.”

I expected more questions and confrontation, but my father remained silent.

My mother removed the blood stain from my sweatshirt, but afterward I saw a hint of its outline. When I put the sweatshirt on, I was reminded of that horrible night. I took it off and never wore it again.

## CHAPTER 9

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WITH THE HELP of the Church and donations from others, the body of the Guatemalan was buried in Tijuana. There was not enough money to send the body home to Guatemala. No one told the authorities that there was a son with the Guatemalan. He was in much distress over the death of his father and the need to bury him in Tijuana, far from his family. He vowed to return the body of his father to Guatemala someday.

In the room behind la cantina he spoke to Raúl and me. “What should I do? I cannot return to Guatemala. I will not be safe there, especially since I fled from the country. They will know I left to avoid the war.” He paused, pacing the room. “My mother, brothers, and sisters need my help. My mother will find some work, maybe, but she will depend on the charity of other family members. I must follow the plan of my father and go north for safety and to find work.”

Raúl looked at him with pity. “It is not easy to find work in el Norte. There is much competition, and your safety cannot be guaranteed there.” Raúl knew that this boy, who was only my age and smaller than I, would have little opportunity to work in los Estados Unidos without help there. Also, he had no money. How would he go there without a coyote? Raúl listened to his lamentable talk, asked a few questions, but said little else.

For one week Felix was with Raúl and some friends of Raúl in Colonia México. During that time, the two spoke often, trying to decide what the boy should do, but he persisted in his desire to go north. When the second week ended, he told Raúl, “I can no longer



stay with you or those people in Colonia México. I am a burden, and there is nothing here for me. I must go north, somehow." Raúl had continued to look for steady work in Tijuana with no success. He knew Felix would find no work or help here. After much more discussion, Raúl said that he would take Felix to el Norte. "In los Estados there are groups that help immigrants from countries at war. Perhaps we can find such people for you, Felix. And what have I to lose?"

I thought it was another venture planned by Raúl that would lead to failure. But Raúl and Felix decided to go. In two days they collected a change of clothes, food for three days, and some water. "We will leave from the place I chose before. The fence is easy to climb, and coyotes do not go there," Raúl said. Late that night, Oro and I watched them climb the border fence, drop to the other side, wave, and disappear into the darkness. For a second time, Raúl had gone north. Would he be more successful this time?

For three weeks my life continued as before with school and work after school. Trips to la playa with Oro were few because of the short days, cold weather, and I knew that Raúl would not be there. The only change to my routine during that time was to celebrate *la Día de los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, and to mock the great deceiver, death. From mid-October the shops were filled with fine wreaths and crosses. I liked the skeletons in the stores. I especially liked to eat the sugar skeletons and coffins and the *pan del muerto*, sweet rolls with dough bones on top. My mother made a small altar to honor her parents. Around their photographs she decorated it with candles, flowers, and beautiful *papeles picados*, paper cutouts, she made herself. On the evening of November 2nd, we walked solemnly to the cemetery where many others had gathered. We lit candles and stayed all night, paying tribute to the parents of my mother at their gravesites by saying prayers, reminiscing about their lives, and toasting to them.

On a warm day four and a half weeks after Raúl left, I returned

to la playa with Oro. We had just reached the sand when Raúl appeared from the back of one of the beach houses. Oro ran to him and jumped on him. Raúl knelt down and petted him but stood when I reached him.

“How long have you been back?” I asked.

“Two days.”

“Have you seen Teresa?”

“No.”

“La migra catch you?”

“No. No work.”

“Felix?”

Raúl was silent for a moment as we stood in front of a beach house. Then he said, “We reached San Diego by midday where we found a very large park I had discovered on my first trip. We ate and slept a little in a grove of trees where we could not easily be seen. By late afternoon we arrived at a church I knew but were directed to another. We returned to the park, spent the night there, and found the other church in the morning. A priest there protects immigrants from countries at war, like Guatemala. There are groups that support him. He agreed to help Felix. Felix, feeling much relief, thanked me many times. The priest also thanked me, but he could not help me because I came only for work. He said there were too many like me to help. He fed both Felix and me and let me stay that night in a room he has for immigrants like Felix. The next day Felix was taken to a group who will shelter him permanently. I returned to the streets and an existence much like the first time I went north. I worked only a few days, slept outside in the cold, and was hungry often.” His head hung down, and he shook it slowly.

“But you did a good thing for Felix.”

He looked up, nodded and said, “Yes ... But I still have no steady work, and my future is ... I do not know what my future is.”

“What will you do now?”

Raúl did not answer. For a moment he looked at the vast ocean. Then he said, "I will work around here. Now, I have to help señor Tejada. We will talk later." He looked at me, turned to go, and then looked at Oro.

"Take him," I said.

He bent down, scratched the head of Oro, and they walked toward la cantina.

I no longer wanted to stay at la playa to sketch but walked slowly home, thinking of the latest venture of Raúl. He had success in helping Felix, but not himself. I wondered what he would do next.

Raúl returned to look for work in Tijuana and to watch the beach houses. Oro returned to Pancho Villa. Oro and I saw Raúl occasionally at la playa, good times for me, to be with my two friends, but difficult ones for Raúl. He was restless and looked everywhere for work, but as before, he found little. Except for the occasions when he saw Teresa, he seemed to have little joy.

One Saturday in early December, we sat silently in his room. Finally he said to me, "I need to know someone who could help me find work in los Estados."

"Why are you not more patient to follow your plan? Do you not have many years to make money for a business in Tijuana?"

"No!" he said sharply, shaking his head. He had the same look that he had when he returned both times from el Norte and on the night when he failed to save the life of the Guatemalan. Elbows on his knees, he held his head in his hands. He had lost his pride. A dark cloud seemed to cover him. "I must have better work now. I cannot wait." He hesitated, then rose from his bed where we sat and stood over me and looked straight into my eyes. "You know why I go. You joke of my trips to Chapúltepec, but do you not see that I care very much for your sister? I wish to marry her someday, and she would be willing. But I know that your father would object now, and I do not blame him. What would I do? Bring her here?" He pointed around the room which suddenly seemed very

different. The crates and boxes of liquor, the dirty refrigerator, and the barren dirty walls spoke of poverty. For Raúl by himself the room was enough for now. But for Teresa? The room was much too dismal for her bright light. To bring her here to live behind la cantina would be an insult. "Should I wait three, four, five years for her?" he asked. "I do not think I can. And I do not think she would wait for me. What else am I to do but to go north?"

I was not surprised that Raúl wished to marry Teresa. Why else did he go north the first time? But I did not know how urgently he wished to marry my sister. And I knew that my father would not agree with such a marriage until Raúl could support Teresa well. How could he let the sunshine pass from his house without a better place for her to dwell?

Often I had spoken well of Raúl in our house. I wished that he could be a part of our family, a brother to me, but the prospect was not good. My father was not like señor García, who wished to marry his daughters quickly and actively sought husbands for them. My father would scrutinize carefully any prospect for the hand of Teresa.

*Navidades*, Christmas time, came, temporarily wiping away the friction I had with my father. The festivities with family and friends gave much enjoyment to our lives. For nine days *Las Posadas* celebrations, processions of children, wound through streets as the holy family sought lodging. At the end they had a *piñata* party. Also, I saw one of *las Pastorelas*, plays where the shepherds come to worship the Christ child. On Christmas Eve we attended the late Mass, *Misa de Gallo*, Rooster Mass, and returned home to enjoy a tamale feast. That was my favorite time.

During that time, Raúl was less depressed. He also joined in the festivities with Teresa and worked a little in Tijuana before and after Christmas when there were more tourists. But in January, he again returned only to watch the beach houses, and his downcast

mood returned. "This is a good time to cross," he said as we sat in his room. "One must always be careful, but now there are fewer patrols of la migra, and I hear that work is available." Raul hesitated. "I am talking with a person who may help me find work." He was talking as much to himself as to me. Perhaps he spoke to Oro, who had stayed with him after Christmas. Oro looked at him and wagged his tail.

"And what of bandits?" I asked, thinking of the Guatemalan. Again, it was only talk. Had he not shown that he could go north without trouble?

"I would tell no one that I was going. Especially, I would not speak of it in la cantina. Where I crossed before when you were with me is safe. Bandits and la migra do not watch there."

Later, one evening during that week, Raúl spoke with my father. I came into the house to find them alone in our front room. They stopped talking when I entered, but I knew what they discussed, so I went straight to my room and closed the door. But the door did not shut out their conversation.

"I do not like what you are planning, Raúl, but I see nothing else. I have searched for work for you, but I have found nothing," said my father.

"When I return, I will have money for a business," Raúl said.

"How long?"

"I do not know, maybe one year or two," said Raúl. "Also, I must have enough money for a good home. Even though she is only a servant, Teresa now lives much of the time in Chapúltepec. Could I provide much less for her?"

"I am glad to hear you say that, Raúl. I too wish Chapúltepec for Teresa, but what does she say?"

"She is not so particular ... now. But I wonder how she will be later. And what if something happens to me? Would I have my wife in the alleys of Tijuana and my children selling chewing gum to tourists? No!"

“Nor would I, Raúl. And if I were alive it would not be. But, of course, you are right. I would not permit Teresa to marry you now. But later ... ?”

The tone my father spoke surprised me. I had expected harsh words, even though I had spoken well of Raúl in our house. I could tell that they had had other talks. Raúl was as determined as my father that Teresa be well cared for. They were men of one mind. So why should there be harsh words?

I thought my father liked Raúl. Maybe in Raúl, he saw a little of himself at a younger age. If that were so, it would account for his rigid attitude about Teresa. He wished the best for her, which, I think, he felt he had not yet provided for my mother.

Raúl wished the same for Teresa. He had made his intentions known. He had now only to show my father that he could provide a good life for her. He had to get work and make good money. He had become a desperate man, and he planned a desperate act.

“You must take Oro,” said Raúl the night two weeks later when he left for los Estados Unidos. We talked of it in his room behind la cantina. “I have prepared for a long journey,” he said. “This time I will go to Los Angeles. I have food for six days of travel; a large water bottle that I can fill at *gasolineras*, gas stations, along the way; some clothes; and some American money.” He showed me a cloth sack tied with a rope for carrying on his shoulder.

“A Norteamericano has shown me the way. I have a map.” Raúl showed me the map, which we studied together. “Here is Los Angeles.” He showed me the place on the map. “I cross here at the fence where Felix and I crossed, go here to San Diego, then up this road which is not along the coast. It has many kilometers where there are no houses or people. I can easily hide. I will travel only at night and sleep during the day. After the town of Temecula, I continue north for many kilometers to the city of Pomona. From there, I go west for one day, maybe two, to reach the place in Los Angeles where the Norteamericano has given me the name of a

contact who will give me work. I will walk all the way. I will not spend the money or take the risk of riding on buses.”

“How will you live, and how will we know about you?”

“I will write to señor Tejada. He knows what I do. And I will write to Teresa.”

“What does señor Tejada say of your plan now?”

Raúl did not answer, for señor Tejada had advised against the venture.

“I have already told Teresa,” Raúl said. “She would be with me now, but I might not go if she were here.”

“And what did she say of it?”

Again Raúl did not answer. She did not want him to leave, but he was determined to go.

“How long will you stay?” I asked.

“I do not know. As long as I have to. Maybe one or two years, or maybe less, if la migra catch me.”

“Are you worried?”

“Yes. But la migra do not worry me. They do not kill immigrantes who have no *permiso de residente*, green card, who do not attack them. Los coyotes and the bandits are the dangerous ones. I have not sought a smuggler, and the bandits will not know what I do. But what lies beyond San Diego is unknown. Travel through unknown country worries me, but I have made such travels before when I came from the south in México. Of course, this time I must hide in a land where English is spoken.”

We sat silently waiting for darkness, while fog oozed in from the ocean around la cantina and the beach houses and reached its fingers for Tijuana. As I followed Raúl through the door into the darkness, I noticed that only the picture that I had drawn of him at Chapultepec remained above his bed. The drawing that I had made of Teresa was gone.

Raúl, Oro, and I walked in silence along Calle Malinche, past Colonia México and Misión Sol to the place at the fence where he

climbed over with Felix. Raúl said, "Watch over Teresa for me. She will be sad for a while. And take care of yourself and Oro."

"I will talk with Teresa often about you and tell her what I learn from your letters to señor Tejada. Oro and I will go to la playa as often as we can to see him."

Raúl then stooped down and spoke softly to Oro and stroked his head. He stood and looked around. When no cars approached, he quickly climbed over the fence and dropped into los Estados Unidos. He turned, smiled at me through the fence, and disappeared into the foggy darkness.

Oro and I watched the fence for only a short time after Raúl had gone. I did not want to draw attention to that place. On the way to Pancho Villa I saw no helicopters or lights from la migra cars. The fog would hide Raúl from la migra that night, but it was not so thick that he could not find his way. My good friend had gone north for the third time. I felt sad to see him go away to a place I did not know and for a time I could not measure. I thought that I would not see his smile again for a very long time.

Later that night, I told my father and mother that Raúl had gone north.

"I know," said my father. "He told me. I have told Teresa she should not wait for him."

I was stunned by his words. Had he not been kind to Raúl?

"He is a man alone, who seeks not only Teresa but a place, a family."

"Yes," said my mother. "Is that wrong? And Teresa cries." She gave my father a mean look.

"El Norte will capture him. You will see," said my father. "He will never again be content with Tijuana. Do you want to see Teresa go north to live there in hiding?" He looked at my mother and then at me.

We did not answer. But that lack of respect for Raúl and his plan expressed by my father was one more wedge between us.



After a week passed, I again returned with Oro to la playa. While passing la cantina, I saw señor Tejada standing outside.

I stopped and asked him, "Have you received a letter from Raúl?"

"No," he answered. His eyes had a look of concern, his face was not round, and wrinkles formed on his forehead between his bushy eyebrows. "I do not like this thing that Raúl has done."

"Go to los Estados Unidos?"

"That, but more. I do not trust the Norteamericano."

"I do not trust Norteamericanos either," I said.

"No, no! Not all Norteamericanos are bad. It is the one who tells Raúl that he will arrange work for him that I do not trust."

"Why do you not trust him?"

"I do not know what the man does in los Estados Unidos, but I have seen what he does here in Tijuana. He is not good. Something tells me that he will not treat Raúl well." The wrinkles in his forehead deepened. "But you know the man, also." He looked into my eyes to make sure that I would hear his words. "He is señor Rodrigo, the man with the spotted dogs."

## CHAPTER 10

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WHEN I LEFT la cantina, I feared for the life of Raúl at the hands of the man who had the spotted dogs. Raúl knew the man preyed on weakness. Could Raúl trust him? I did not think so.

For days I thought of Raúl often. Did he reach his place in Los Angeles? Did he have a room to sleep in? Was he working? What work was he doing? Was he making much money? I asked those questions of Oro, but he could not answer. He only looked at me with eyes that understood that we missed our good friend. Then, he wagged his tail and pushed me with his nose and would not stop until I petted him and wrestled with him.

When I saw Teresa, I asked her if she had heard from Raúl, but she had not. She no longer seemed happy and joyful, but moody. She spoke sharply in our conversation. I tried to console her. “Raúl will be successful,” I said. “He is smart and resourceful. He will find good work and be safe.” Of course I was telling myself these things to raise my spirits also, but I was not very convincing.

Teresa answered, “I do not know if he will be safe or successful. All I know is that he is gone, and I miss him. Each day is so long and the nights... She began to cry. “Our father said I should not wait for him, find someone else.” Her face became angry. “I will wait for him.”

Being reminded that my father told Teresa to forget Raúl strengthened the fence I was building between him and me.

Later, brief conversations I had with Teresa were much the same, and, at times, I saw her weeping. Although I tried to console her, I failed, because I did not know what to say.

I continued to look for work after school, and I played fútbol with my friends whenever my friends and I could find time. At this time of year, boys played basketball in other parts of Tijuana where there were courts. And there were long-standing neighborhood rivalries. But we had no court, so we continued to play fútbol. That was when I completely forgot about everything else. I liked to play midfielder, running to support the defense and then take the ball to the goal and pass to a striker for a shot, or sometimes shoot for the goal myself. When Oro would find us, he would also try to play by chasing the ball and defending both goals. If one or more of the players thought the game was serious, they would yell at me, "Ernesto, catch Oro and keep him out of the game." But Oro was hard to catch, and usually the game was not serious. We would end it laughing and sitting together with Oro. We would stop playing fútbol in a month or two and turn to playing béisbol. We all had gloves, treasured possessions, and would look around at each other asking, "Who has a ball? Who has a bat?" But fútbol and béisbol were soon forgotten.

Three weeks after Raúl left, a cold wind blew from the north. For three days the wind blew, and each day was colder than the last. I cannot remember a time when I was so cold. On the third night, when I went to bed wearing much clothing, I could not get warm. Even when I put my head beneath my blankets, my breath did little to warm me. I finally fell asleep, wondering if Raúl was as cold in el Norte as I was. I wished that Oro would come into my house and be next to me to warm me. But my father still forbade him to be in the house.

I dreamed that Oro had come into my room and that I heard him barking. But why would he bark? Then I felt a hard pull at my blankets and my sleeve so that I fell startled from my bed. Oro stood over me and barked. Then, I smelled the smoke. I had smelled smoke in Pancho Villa for days, from fires people burned in their houses to keep warm. But the smell was very strong, and

sounds of fire and people yelling came from outside. Oro turned from me and ran from my room. A moment later, as I rose to my feet, my father rushed in and yelled for me to get out quickly. Pancho Villa was on fire.

I ran from the house with my mother and father behind me. To the north, a wall of fire higher than our house raced toward us from only three hundred meters away. It swallowed one house, causing flaming boards and paper to fly up in its midst.

Everywhere, people were running away from the fire in panic. Some carried children. Others carried belongings — a chair, a box. A woman carried pans and pots in one hand and led a child with the other. A man pushed a bicycle, but did not ride it. Another man ran with bottles of liquor in his hands. He stumbled and dropped the bottles, which broke on the ground. For a moment he stared at them as the dirt swallowed the liquor. Then, he looked over his shoulder at the fire that pursued him and lurched ahead. Guillermo pushed his cart, only to have it stick in a rut in the road. A man came to help him, but the flames roared toward them, and they ran, leaving the cart.

Others, like my father, warned neighbors whose houses were in the path of the fire. Oro ran everywhere, barking and waking those who slept.

My father, together with Oro, had awakened the Garcías, even as the flames approached the roof of their house.

My father led one of the García children out of their house, followed by señora García, who pushed two in front of her. My mother rushed to her aid. Oro pulled Julio by the sleeve as he cried and rubbed his eyes. señor García followed, carrying one and leading another.

As señor García ran from the house, the family gathered around him and he pointed to the east, to Avenida J. They began to run in the direction he pointed, away from the fire. And I ran with them.

Then, señora García stopped and looked around at her children as they fled. She screamed, “Alicia! Alicia!” and turned to run back to the house that was now engulfed in flames. señor García chased after her. He caught her and held her, shaking his head at her as the fire roared and shut out their voices. But I heard her scream again above the roar, “Alicia! Alicia!”

Flames shot out of the windows of my house, but I took little notice as I watched the Garcias. Señora Garcia dropped to the dirt, escaping the embrace of her husband, and began to crawl to her flaming house. But señor García stopped her, picked her up, and turned to carry her from the fire.

Oro suddenly appeared from nowhere and raced toward their house. Had he heard Alicia? He entered the flames, which was no longer a house but an orange, snapping, writhing, living, monster. He had been in the belly of the monster for only a moment when the roof collapsed, and flames shot high in the air.

I screamed for him. I could not help myself. I watched for him to come from the flames with Alicia, but saw only a piece of cardboard rise high in the dark sky.

I stood, staring at the fire. My mouth was dry. I pulled at my clothes, not knowing what to do. I could only stand there watching the flames.

My father ran to me, grabbed my shoulders, his face close to mine and yelled, “Ernesto, run for Avenida J.” But I could not move. He did not wait, but picked me up and carried me from the path of the fire to Avenida J where my mother waited. He left me there and said, “Climb the hill to the east.” He then went with other men to fight the fire. My mother and I ran up the east hill, while the flames sped past us up the hill to the south.

Many ran to the east of Avenida J, yelling, crying, screaming. After I had reached safety, I stood on the hill watching the fire sweep to the south. Among those yelling and crying stood others like me — as statues, staring, numb, without feeling. Señora

García could not stand, but sat in the dirt, weeping into her hands. She could not look at the scene any more. The flames had stolen her house and the life of Alicia, her youngest and much beloved daughter. She was her smiling little flower, a flower yet in its bud.

My mother left to talk with others she knew and I stood alone watching the fire move up the hill. Firefighters came to stop it and were joined by Viallista gang members, neighborhood men, and men from nearby Tijuana. My father was among them, using a blanket to smother flames started by flying debris. I watched him go here, then there, until he disappeared among the growing crowd of men moving up the hill.

I stood as in a trance, expecting that Oro would appear with Alicia if only I waited long enough. I watched as the men gained control of the fire at the top of the southern hill, but I had no sense of time passing. The fire was being contained. Finally, it was stopped, its destruction confined to a part of Pancho Villa canyon.

After what seemed to be half a lifetime, my mother came to me and said that we would go to the house of friends for the night. As I stood watching the dying flames, she put her arm around me and hugged me to her. Tears, smoke, and dirt stained her face, and dirt covered her feet and legs and smudged her clothes. When I looked at her, I am now ashamed to say, I cried. But I could not help myself. We were without a home. Los inocentes had perished. Alicia and Oro were gone. I felt numb and helpless, lost in a familiar place. My mother led me away as one would lead a blind man.

## CHAPTER 11

---

MY MOTHER, FATHER, and I slept that night in the home of a man who worked with my father. His home was in a part of the city that escaped the fire and was away from the noise and chaos it caused. Our friends knew our feelings and spoke only to comfort us. I tried to sleep, but I could not shut out visions of the fire. Finally, sleep did come, but I slept fitfully. I woke often, only to sleep and wake again. Each time when I awoke and sat up, I believed the fire to be a bad dream. But when my mind threw off the sleep, I discovered to my sorrow that it was real. And I lay back down to try to sleep again, to put away the terrible reality. Then, I woke to find daylight and activity all around. With the day came the truth. There had been a monstrous, destructive fire. Our house was burned. And Alicia and Oro had perished.

When I returned with my parents to Pancho Villa later that afternoon, others were already there, picking among the hot ashes. Sadness marked every face. I thought if I would draw such a scene, I would sketch with charcoal, for most of Pancho Villa was black and gray. I would draw with broad lines heaps of rubble that once were homes. I would draw random and odd shapes between them. Those shapes were a fence untouched; a metal roof half collapsed, held by a metal corner post that did not burn; a concrete block wall; a melted icebox; cars that were blackened and would never run again; a pile of char that once was the pushcart of Guillermo. The grass of señor Cardenas was still a little green, but I saw no goats. A store stood with blackened stucco walls, a collapsed roof, and black smoke stains surrounding the broken windows.

The smell of smoke was strong, and dust choked us so that we tied cloths around our noses and mouths. Even to this day I smell smoke faintly in my mind when a cold wind blows from the north.

We learned that the fire started in the shack of the old Aguilar couple, who lived at the north end of Pancho Villa. A fire they made in a makeshift brick container in their room blazed up while they slept. They died from the smoke before the shack was engulfed in flames. Several of our neighbors were burned, some seriously, including my friend Oscar.

In the midst of this chaos stood the walls that once were my home. My father, mother, Teresa, and I walked solemnly among the remains of our house. My father pushed on the walls, pounded them with his fist, and kicked them to test their strength. I have since thought that he stood so straight that day because of his pride in the walls that remained standing against the fire. And those walls gave him an idea for the future.

The other parts of the house did not survive. The wooden floor was ashes and charred wood pieces which even then were warm. Part of the metal roof had blown away; other parts were bent, twisted, and charred. All that my mother had was destroyed — her painted table and chairs, the curtains at the windows, her clothes that she had made, her sewing machine. All the color in our house was gone. When she saw it, she wept quietly. My father, Teresa, and I comforted her. But she, too, was strong and soon began to remove the ashes and debris.

Others from Pancho Villa also returned to clean up and rebuild. Some found nothing at all to return to and nothing at all from which to start rebuilding. The Garcías were one such family. They came with friends, who helped them dig through the rubble. After they had worked only a short time, their friends took them away. Their grief was too great for them to stay.

I watched the work where the home of the Garcías had stood, hoping that Oro and Alicia would not be found, that somehow



they had escaped. But they were found together. The body of Oro surrounded the child as if to protect her. How can I tell you how I felt when I learned that Oro and Alicia were there? The pride to have such a brave friend. The sadness that he and Alicia were gone. The helplessness to confront something over which I had no control. Can you not feel how I did?

I continued to help with the cleanup, but did so only as if I were a machine without a mind and with a heart too numb to feel. Others around me seemed the same. We had the help of the city workers and the road workers, like my father. The work was hard and dirty, but the people of Pancho Villa returned to do it and to rebuild. Most of them had nowhere else to go.

Then came the funerals. The funeral for Alicia García was particularly sorrowful. Many attended and many wept. Oro also was buried. He had become known all around Pancho Villa, and was praised for his bravery during the fire. He had awakened many in the path of the fire and saved many lives. How would that night have been if Raúl had stayed at la playa and Oro with him? Oro would have lived, but many others would have died. But what good does it do to think of how it might have been?

I received much attention, because everyone knew that Oro was my dog. Many said that they were sorry such a fine dog had died. Others thought that I was fortunate to have had such a brave dog. All of them were correct.

Because my father worked on the roads, he knew where to find building materials. He first wanted to replace the roof. With the roof covered, we could move back home. He bought some wood for roof beams, and I helped him cut them to size and attach them to the walls. We worked on our house by lantern light early in the morning before my father went to work and late into the night after he returned. He then brought home corrugated metal which we attached to the roof beams and the walls. With the roof on, we

returned to live in Pancho Villa. My mother found some cots for us to sleep on, an old table and three chairs. She used a portable stove provided by a friend for cooking. My father brought large bottles of water and a stand for them. He bought a portable toilet and a basin for washing. With my help he hung doors at the south and east side of the front room. Oilcloth temporarily covered the windows. Our basic needs were provided. We were relatively secure and continued to rebuild the house.

We were one of the first to return to Pancho Villa. Others followed us. Still others would never return. The Garcías found another place with friends in Misión Sol. Another family began to build where the house of the Garcías had been.

One morning, I saw my father looking to the north sky where clouds were forming. That night his work truck stopped near our house. He hauled sand from the truck with a wheelbarrow, piling it at the side of our house. While he did that, he gave me sacks and a shovel and said to fill them quickly with sand, which I did. We then put the sandbags around the side of the house that faced the hill to the south and in front of our south-facing door. "Rain is coming," he said, "and we must be prepared."

The rain came that night and beat upon our new roof and at the doors and windows. We watched as the rain formed streams of muddy water that swept down the streets and around the houses, carving deep ruts in the earth. Some partly rebuilt houses washed away as homes do each year in Colonia México and Misión Sol.

During a lull in the rain, my father looked at the sky and said, more to himself than to me, "Water ... . Water ..... Now is when I should bring water to the house and pipe it inside. Cold and hot. And electricity to each room." He turned and looked at the house. "El baño there behind the bedroom. The kitchen there." He pointed to the west. "Or maybe on the north side. Yes, the north side. Less pipe. I must think more about this, how to enlarge the house, where to break the walls and put new doors. But now is

the time to bring in water and electricity.” As if saying water had some magical effect, the rain began again, rattling loudly on the metal roof.

My father and I continued to stand at the south door watching the rain. After a while I noticed him staring at me. I thought by his look that I should be doing something, but at first I did not know what I should be doing. Then I realized that the new plans my father had for the house would cost much money. Since the fire, I had worked only a little for money. Most of my time after school I had worked on the house. But, from the stare of my father, I knew I should be doing more to make money. So I began again to go into the city to find work. I had to be clever, because my friends, who also had to help rebuild their homes, looked for work. I usually went to merchants I knew. Most knew of the fire and some gave me chores to do. I delivered merchandise. I cleaned. Even though I worked, the money I made seemed so small considering all that needed to be replaced and the costs to enlarge the house.

At home, even when working, I was reminded of the fire when I looked where the home of the Garcías had been. As time passed, and the new house took shape, I hoped that my grief would diminish, but it did not. The new neighbor paid my father to build new walls of concrete block like our house, and I helped him by mixing mortar and carrying blocks. Merely being where Alicia and Oro had perished made me even sadder.

Although I had many friends from school and Pancho Villa, I had no friend to replace Oro. During the days, I sometimes forgot about him, because I was so busy with school and work. But at night, as I lay awake in my bed, my thoughts went to him. I felt empty and hurt inside, as in times when I was hungry, until sleep came and took away the pain.

My father had noticed my grief. One day he told me that I could have another dog. But he did not understand that I did not want another dog. I resented what he said, just as I resented his

stares. He had kept Oro from coming into our house. Now he wanted to give me another dog? Did he think that Oro was only a plaything to be exchanged for another? I hated my father for it. I did not realize then that his offer was meant only in kindness. He offered me a better gift than the earrings he had given to Teresa. But I could not see it.

Since my earliest years, his strict discipline toward me caused me to build a fence between us. He made me feel that I could do nothing right in his eyes. The fence was growing stronger each day. I resented him so much that I did not want to be around him. The fence between us would become impenetrable by his continuing stares, his future actions, and by an unexpected source — señora García.

## CHAPTER 12

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THE HOUSE SLOWLY began to return to the way it had been before the fire. My father brought home some wood to rebuild the supports for a new floor. I helped him install them. He then brought wood for the floor. Again, I helped him cut the wood and nail it to the floor supports. Some of the money I made working for merchants in the city went to buy furniture, but it was not as good as we had before. We bought two more wooden chairs for use at the table. We now had five. Friends gave us two small wooden chests with drawers for clothes and shelves for the kitchen. We continued to sleep on the cots my mother had found. My mother painted and decorated the table, chairs, and chests. She washed the walls, but smoke stains and the smell of smoke remained.

I worked a week at a store in the city and was given white paint for my work. With it, I painted the inside walls of the house. But one coat did not hide all the black of the fire. And still there was much more to be done. Oilcloth remained at the windows, more clothes and bedding had to be replaced, and my mother needed a sewing machine. The nights were cold, and each time the rains came my father and I stood guard over the sandbags. Every day, the quiet stare from my father continued, which said to me, "Ernesto, you must work harder. We need more money." I knew he thought of his plan to enlarge the house and bring water and electricity to it.

One day, to take away my grief, I returned to la playa to sketch. But la playa only reminded me more of Oro. I remembered our walks and runs, our visits with Raúl and talks with señor Tejada,

our conquest of the spotted dogs. Each wave that broke on the sand brought another memory.

When I tried to sketch, I found that my hand would not make even a line. I had no will to force my hand, and it would not draw. After a time, I buried the paper I brought and threw away the charcoal I had found. Instead, I sat numbly behind la cantina with no thoughts at all and just stared at the sea. When the sun set, I remembered other sunsets and the many times I came to la playa with Oro and visited with Raúl.

Señor Tejada found me as I arose to leave. He did not ask me how I was, because he must have seen my melancholy. He knew of the fire and Oro. He spoke to cheer me up. "I have just received a letter from Raúl. Would you like to see it?"

I read it eagerly. Raúl gave his address, but instructed that letters be sent to another place which was safe from discovery by la migra. He spoke of long hours of hard work first one place then another, but he had the promise of much money. And he spoke of other immigrants whom he knew, and some who he lived with. There was a hint of loneliness in his letter, and I felt closer to him. After I read his letter, I began to think more each day of Raúl in los Estados Unidos.

I was still in a lonely mood from which I could not free myself, when, a few days later, I returned home from school to find my mother talking with señora García. Señora García missed seeing her friends in Pancho Villa, but her grief had prevented her from returning to her old home. Now, she came and spoke quietly with my mother.

After I greeted them, I walked quickly to my room so that I would not disturb their conversation, but my mother called to me. "Señora García has come for a visit, and she has made a request."

I looked at señora García, who smiled slightly and then looked at the floor. She was a small woman, who cared for her children with great patience and was kindly to everyone she knew.

Those who knew her loved her. Even though she was very poor and dressed in clothes that would be rags to another, she never before asked anything of our family.

“Señora García knows how well you draw,” my mother continued. “She had seen the picture you drew of Julio holding Oro, but it was lost in the fire. She would like for you to draw a picture of Alicia with Oro.” Then she said, “She has no pictures of Alicia.”

Señora García continued to look at the floor, wiping her eyes with her hand.

When my mother told me of the request of señora García, I could only think how I had been unable to draw. I would have done anything I could for her, as I would for my mother, but I could no longer draw. In my mind, I could still picture Alicia, and Oro has always remained in detail. But my will to draw had gone so that I could create not even a line. My grief had shut out what I really could do. I did not speak for a moment so that my mother looked at me, puzzled by my silence. Then, I stammered that I would do it.

Señora García looked up at me with tears in her eyes and smiled. If she in her grief could ask, I in my grief could try to fulfill her request.

That night, when my father came home, my mother told him of the request of señora García. He said little at first, but only looked at me. Then, he asked, “Will you do it?”

I nodded.

He nodded in return, saying, “That is good.”

I continued to look at him, expecting him to say more, but for a moment he said nothing. Then he said, “You must draw a good picture for señora García. It will be her only remembrance of Alicia.”

His command that my drawing must be good put more strength in the fence that separated us. Had he not prohibited me

from drawing? Now, he wanted me to make a *good* drawing? Did he not know that I would do my best for señora García?

He paused, and I could see that he wanted to say more. Although I listened, I did not hear. Much later, I remembered what he said, and the words seared into my memory.

“You must understand that my objection to your drawing has a reason,” my father said. “I do not see how you can draw, and excluding all else, make a living. If a father does nothing else for his son, he must keep him from mistakes. Then the son can have a better life than the father. I cannot see how you can draw and make enough money to live. You would have worse conditions than these.” He pointed around the room which was stark from loss of furnishings, had oilcloth at the windows, and black from smoke showing through the first coat of paint I had put on the walls. “To see you take such a course toward even greater poverty than we have is hard for me to accept. I wish better for you. That is why I make you work hard at school and seek endeavors that will lead to good work when you are older.”

He sat down in a chair at the table. Then, he looked up at me as I stood before him. “Señora García has seen that you are good at drawing. Maybe others will too. It is not for me to say that you should not draw. But I could not be a good father without guiding you to seek another type of work also, if drawing will not sustain you. That I will continue to do.” He paused as if he wanted to say something more. Then he said, “Never again will I forbid you to draw.” He continued looking at me very seriously and said, “This picture for señora García. It must be a good one.”

All I heard was his last sentence — that command to do a good drawing. He had already said it to me. I wanted to yell out at him, “Do you think I would not do my best for señora García? Do you think I do not try to do my best to earn money to help rebuild and enlarge the house? What do you expect of me?” But



I was afraid of my father. I was afraid of what he would do if I questioned him. So I said nothing.

With the acceptance of the request of *señora* García and the admonition of my father, I again tried to sketch in preparation for the drawing. But always my heart prevented me. Sometimes I drew a few lines. Never did I draw enough that the shapes of Alicia and Oro could be seen. When I returned home from seeking work in Tijuana, the need to work on the house and produce the drawing confronted me. The continuing looks from my father bore into me, making me feel that each day I was a failure in his eyes.

I could see the condition of the house, that we needed more money than I was bringing home. I painted the walls a second time with paint I earned, but it seemed a small contribution. And I could not draw. Still, the looks of my father continued. I thought they said to me, "You need to make more money, Ernesto. You need to work harder, Ernesto. You need to finish the drawing, and it must be very good, Ernesto."

I wished to see Raúl, to talk with him about my dilemma. I thought that he was the only one I knew who would understand. At first, I thought about him only briefly. Then more often, until I was thinking of him many times each day. I wished that I were with him, that I could see him, talk to him, and receive his advice. Like the spark that ignited into the fire of Pancho Villa, my first brief thoughts of Raúl increased. As I thought more of him, I thought also of crossing the border to see him. At first it was a fantasy, an imagination. Then, it grew to a possibility. Here was the escape from my dilemma. The fence I had built between my father and me was no longer a fence but a wall, built stone by stone over time. It was now impenetrable. I thought there was now no link between us, except the money I could make for him. Going north was the opportunity to make much money for him and escape the need to draw the picture which I promised but could not produce.

With whispers of el Norte beckoning, I continued day after

day to attend school and seek work. But I could not draw. Each time I looked around the house I saw the need for so much to be done. The needs seemed to grow, but there never seemed to be enough money to make the needed improvements. My contribution seemed insignificant. Always, when I was in the presence of my father, I thought his eyes followed me continuously. They said, "Work harder. Make more money. Draw a good picture." I did not know how I could do more. The growing wall between my father and me had led to the impulse to go north, to see Raúl, to earn money. That impulse had grown upon my mind and given me a new direction. I was becoming desperate, and crossing to el Norte was becoming a necessity. The impulse to go north was so strong that I could not, or would not, counter it. Considering the trouble I caused, I have tested my impulses since then to see if they were worthy to grow upon my mind.

I spoke with señor Tejada, although I did not tell him of my intent. He showed me on a map the path that Raúl had taken. I remembered how Raúl had shown me the path he would take on a map he had before he left, but I did not tell señor Tejada. I studied the map carefully, tracing in my mind the way that Raúl had gone, memorizing names of cities and towns, highways and streets, distances that must be traveled and the address in Los Angeles where Raúl lived. After I left señor Tejada and la cantina, I transferred what I had seen and remembered to a paper I had brought with me. I made a map by my own hand. With the map, my course was set. The stares of my father continued and even seemed to intensify. I could stay in his house no longer. An easier path, I thought, was to follow Raúl. How wrong I was!

I waited until a Friday night when Tijuana was busy with tourists. After my parents had gone to bed, I wrote a note telling them I had gone north to seek Raúl and work for money we needed. In misty darkness, I scaled the border fence where Raúl had gone before me. I carried food enough for six days and a bottle

of water rolled in a blanket and tied with a rope. I wore a second shirt under my jacket, and hid six American dollars in my shoes. When I dropped into los Estados Unidos and sat by the fence listening for la migra, all the past events with Raúl and Oro flashed through my mind. At that moment, I felt more alone than I ever had before.

PART 2

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THE NORTH



## CHAPTER 13

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THE DARKNESS of the unknown kept me pinned to the border fence. I looked back at the distant lights of Tijuana. No, I could not turn back. After a moment, I stood and stepped forward, but stumbled in a hole. I stood quietly and listened but hearing no response continued on.

When I left the fence that separated me from my home, I stepped tentatively into the empty blackness of the path I had chosen. The lights of Tijuana lay behind me. Clouds covered the sky, and a mist filled the air. Before me, no houses or shops provided light to guide me.

I began to run across ground covered by new grass and small bushes. Ditches and ruts seemed to be everywhere. I stumbled over shrubs and stepped unexpectedly into holes, so that twice I sprawled upon the ground. After the second fall, I slowed my pace and took care where I placed my feet. I felt that I was being pursued by the great black shadow of *la migra*. And worse was the twin shadow of the unknown which confronted me with each step. I thought that bandits would suddenly step in front of me. I longed for the companionship of Oro to protect me and guide my way.

Keeping the lights of Tijuana over my right shoulder, I walked for a time that seemed to be hours. But only a few minutes passed when I came upon a road that ran to my right and left. I knew I must follow that road to the east until I found another road running from it to the north. The north road would lead to a bridge over the Tijuana River.

I had been beside the road for only a short time when I heard a noise behind me. I turned to see a large, gray dog trotting toward me. I stopped and faced him. He stopped and lowered his head, but his eyes looked up at me. He showed his teeth, and his fur stood up on his back. He slowly approached me and growled deep within his throat.

I knew that Oro and I together could have fought him off, but I felt helpless alone. I kept my face toward him and quickly glanced around for a weapon, a stick or rock. I knew that to run would invite attack. I stopped beside some stones that lay on the ground, but I did not take my eyes from the beast. When I knelt down to pick up one of the rocks, the dog stopped, but continued to watch me and growl. When I stood, he again began to slink toward me. I walked slowly backward as he crept after me. I raised my arm and made a motion to throw the stone. The dog stopped, stood, and barked twice. Then he lowered his head and crept toward me again.

Only a moment after he barked, another dog ran toward us. He was like the first, except smaller and blacker. As he approached, he slowed his run, lowered his head, showed his teeth, and stood at a distance from the first dog. Together, they crept toward me.

Were there more? Was there a pack of wild dogs in this empty land? Spotted dogs, now these, I thought. Was my life to be filled with dog attacks? Did they attack all pollos? Were they la migra dogs? I quickly looked around, but no immigration police appeared to be near.

I continued to walk backward, keeping my eyes on them, when I noticed the smaller dog move farther to my left, away from the other. I knew that if he circled me I would be between them. If they both attacked me from opposite sides, I would have difficulty defending myself and might be severely wounded by their bites. I raised my arm again and made a motion to throw the rock. Both dogs lifted their heads and barked, but quickly dropped their heads again and began slowly to separate, to circle around me.

How stupid of me! Their barks could alert la migra.

An open field surrounded me. I could go nowhere for refuge. I knew that I must do something to protect myself. Then, I thought of the food I brought. Maybe they smelled it. Maybe they attacked all pollos for food. I reached quickly into the blanket roll, found the cloth that held the food, and took out a piece of meat. I threw it between them, but nearer the smaller dog who leapt at it. Before he could reach it, the larger dog attacked him, and the two fought, snarling, turning and twisting upon the ground.

I ran from them, leaving them to fight between themselves for the morsel. When I reached the road that ran to the north, I no longer heard them fighting. I crossed the road but found a cultivated field on that side. I recrossed the road and walked at a distance beside it, using it to guide my way north.

I had not gone far when I heard the sound of a car but saw no lights. I dropped quickly to the ground and crawled to a low place surrounded by bushes. The car soon reached the place in the road where I crossed. A light shined, searching the road ahead and the ground beside the road near where I lay. I pressed myself flat to the ground among the bushes. At the edge of the road, the light framed one of the dogs that had threatened me. Suddenly, the light went out, and the car sped down the road.

I rose to my knees and watched the car disappear in the darkness ahead only to hear a noise behind me. Not five meters away the smaller black dog limped forward and crouched, showing its teeth and growling at me. Had la migra thought they had seen un conejo, only to have this dog appear in their lights? Had the dog saved me from la migra only to threaten me again?

When I had thrown the piece of meat at the dogs, I threw it nearer this smaller one, because I thought that the larger dog might attack it. If I threw the meat at the larger one, I did not know if this one would attack the larger dog. The dogs did fight, but my plan did not work, because here was this dog again. Had



this smaller dog beaten the larger one? I did not think so. Had this one only been chased away? Would the meat I threw be enough for the larger one, or would he, too, return for more? And were there even more dogs? These questions came quickly to my mind but without answers.

I searched around me for rocks and found two. I threw one and hit the dog on his side. He yelped and barked and moved away a short distance. After the dog barked, I realized that his barking could summon *la migra* in the car that passed. Again, I thought how foolish to cause the dog to bark. But would I rather be attacked? The dog crouched and continued to watch me.

Now, I had *la migra* in my path and this snarling dog behind. I walked in a crouch in the direction the car had gone, but stayed away from the road. I moved slowly at first, going from bush to bush, while also watching the dog. He limped behind, but when I raised my hand with the rock in it, he stopped and sat back on his haunches. In this way, I followed the direction of the road for about half a kilometer or a little more with the dog following me.

At first I could not see where the car had gone. Then, about two hundred meters ahead, its lights went on. It was stopped at the far end of the bridge over the Tijuana River. A light from it scanned the field beyond the bridge. After a moment, two other lights left the car, moved along the road to the field, and disappeared.

Kneeling, I watched the car lights ahead of me and the dog that followed me. The dog now lay upon his stomach behind me, watching me, but not moving. He no longer showed his teeth, but his eyes were alert to every move I made.

After a time that made me grow cold from the mist and from not moving, lights appeared from the field. In the lights of the car, *la migra* officers led two men and placed them beside the car, searched them, and then put them into it. The car, its lights on, turned around and returned across the bridge and along the road. Again I pressed myself against the ground as the car passed. And

the dog moved slowly toward me. After la migra passed, I raised to my knees and lifted my hand as if to throw the rock. The dog again stopped and crouched on his stomach to watch me.

When several minutes had passed, and I was certain the car was far from me, I stood and walked toward the road which led to the bridge. The black dog limped behind me, never coming closer than five meters. I did not think that la migra would watch the road now that they had two of los pollos.

Upon reaching the bridge, I wished to run across it quickly, but I feared that the dog would attack if I ran. So, I tested him by first walking faster and then trotting and then running. He did not attack, but limped behind me. When he drew too close to me, I turned toward him and raised my hand to make him stop.

I had run along the bridge to a point where I could dimly see the field beyond, when I saw movement in the field. I stopped quickly and knelt down beside the bridge railing. Two figures ran across the field beside the road. I crouched lower and remained motionless as I watched them. There are many pollos tonight, I thought, which was good for me. La migra might not catch all of us.

I ran across the bridge and into the field after the men I had seen. I kneeled down and watched them until they disappeared in the darkness ahead. They could lead me out of this place, I thought. But I did not want them to see me, because I could not trust them. After waiting a short time, I walked slowly in the direction where I had seen them last, toward lights of a few widely separated houses far in the distance.

During this time, I had lost my fear of the dog. I looked back at him to see if he still followed, but I did not think he would attack. I had gone about a hundred meters when I heard him growl. I turned and raised my hand with the rock, but he crouched at least seven meters from me and continued to growl. When he did not attack, I turned back to face two men. One, a large black

bearded man, leaped at me, grabbed my arm, and shook the rock from my hand.

At first I thought la migra had caught me, but the man who held me wore no immigration police uniform. He dressed in dark pants and jacket. The other man stood behind him wearing worn jeans and a heavy shirt, such as worn by a farmer from south of Tijuana. He carried a bundle tied with a rope over his shoulder. I knew I faced a coyote and one of his pollos, and I was afraid.

“Why do you follow us?” asked the coyote in Spanish.

“I do not follow you,” I said. “I only go north.” I knew that I must be careful with this coyote. He was a desperate man, who had already lost two pollos.

“When did you first see us?” he asked.

“At the river, when I was on the bridge.” I tried to pull my hand free from him, but he held it tightly. I could feel my body shake but not only from the cold.

“Then you followed us?” He asked again. “Did you see the car of la migra?”

“Yes.”

“And did you see any men?”

“La migra?”

“No. Did you see men who were taken by la migra?”

“Yes. In the lights of the car, I saw two.”

“Do you work for la migra? Do you and this dog watch for *alambres*, wire jumpers, for them?”

His question surprised me. Such a thing was so far from my mind. “No. And this is not my dog,” I answered. “He and another have pursued me, since I passed the place where two roads meet.”

“Muchacho,” said the bearded man. “Two men were caught by la migra tonight, and you were not.”

A knife appeared in his free hand. He pointed it at me and moved it toward me slowly, until the point touched my chest. I

tried to pull away from him, but his grip was too strong. Then, he released me, but still held the knife at my chest.

“Go to the dog, and let us see if he is your friend, or if he pursues you as you say.”

I turned toward the dog, which still crouched behind me. As I moved toward him, he growled, and the hair on his back bristled. He stood and moved away from me.

I turned back to the two men. “I only go north. As you can see, the dog is not mine. And this is my blanket with food and water for my journey.” I showed them what I carried. I stood a few meters from the man. I was prepared to run if he threatened me again with his knife.

He put his knife away and said, “Stay here until you see lights from a car over there by the highway.” He pointed to a distant place far to the east.

I said, “I will not move.”

The two men ran out of the field then north along the road. I soon lost them in the darkness. Many minutes later, car lights flashed on in the distance. Only after the car moved toward the highway did I begin walking north again beside the road.

I reached a dirt road running east and stopped. The dog did not follow, but stayed back in the field. My fear of him had turned to pity. In the darkness, I looked more closely at him. He appeared so thin and pathetic. I thought that he would make a good companion in my long journey north, and for a moment I saw Oro in him. I wished that I had the eyes of Oro to guide me.

I reached into my blanket roll, found the bag of food and another piece of meat. I threw it to him, thinking that he might come to me and be my companion. He ran to the meat and gulped it down. With his head lowered, he looked at me, turned, limped back in the direction from which he had come, and disappeared into the darkness.

## CHAPTER 14

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I STOOD ON the dirt road, trying to decide what to do, continue north or follow the road east as the coyote must have done. I decided to follow the road east. Freed from the threat of the dog, I ran. Remembering my many runs to la playa along Calle Malinche, I ran with alertness as I had when I passed Colonia México and Misión Sol.

The surrounding country was farmland and small ranches with houses set far apart. Eucalyptus trees lined the road to the east with tall bushes spread between them. I had been running only for a short time when the lights of a car turned from a side road onto the road toward me. I jumped behind bushes, dropped to the ground, and crawled forward. The car drove past, then spun around, tires slipping on the dirt of the road. The car slowly returned along the road and stopped behind where I lay.

Shouts and what sounded like arguments came from the car, although I could not understand the words. A gunshot cracked and the bullet tore through tree branches high behind where I lay. The arguing and shouting grew louder. The car wheels spun in the road, spraying dirt and gravel behind them as the car roared past me in the direction I first saw it. I lay quietly until I no longer heard it.

If the gang in the car had tried to kill me, they were very bad shots. If they had tried to scare me, they succeeded. If anyone nearby had heard the shot, they could call the police. That was possibly why the car left so quickly. I knew I must get away from

there fast. I ran along the road until I came to one going north and ran along it.

As I ran, I wondered why the men or boys in the car argued. I hoped that some protested shooting the gun and that is why the bullet struck high in the trees. I did not want to come to a country where I could be shot.

I turned east on another road toward the highway running north and south about a half kilometer away. I ran along the road as it crossed over the highway. On the other side, I found myself on a street lined with houses and streetlights. The possibility of being seen made me feel uncomfortable. So I continued running for several blocks, until I came upon railroad tracks that ran north and south. They were separated from the houses and no lights shone on them. I turned north and slowed to walk along the tracks, because I felt safer there than on the streets. But I worried that *la migra* would watch the tracks and that trains could rush upon me suddenly. I felt uneasy and looked for any movement and for places to run if I should see danger.

After I had walked along the tracks a few kilometers, there were no more houses on either side. In this emptiness, the tracks came to a bridge that crossed a river. I started walking across the bridge, when I heard a train behind me. I quickly ran back off the bridge and down an embankment where I hoped I could not be seen. The train had only a few cars and moved slowly past me. I wondered, Why was it traveling late on a Friday night? Where was it going? What was its purpose? These were only questions to occupy my mind, because they had no answers. I waited until after the train had completely crossed the bridge. Then, I quickly crossed it.

After the river, the tracks entered an area of warehouses and buildings with large trucks parked beside them. Walking along the railroad tracks had become hard, because of the rocks and cross ties. I chose, instead, to walk along a road that ran beside the

tracks. The hour was late, and I saw no one on the streets. I felt that I must hurry, but that I must not run. To run would cause me to be noticed. Besides, my tired legs would not permit me to run.

Cantinas appeared among the buildings. When I passed one, the air smelled of stale cigarette smoke and beer, and I heard voices within. I passed quickly by those places where men were. I did not wish to be seen or direct attention to myself. I had just passed by one, when the smell of la cantina followed me. I turned to see a man, with a large belly, behind me. A red baseball cap sat crookedly on his head. He lurched toward me, reaching out for me. I smelled his cantina breath as his hand touched my shoulder. But his eyes were glazed as though he did not see me.

I quickly turned from him and ran. Before, I was too tired to run. Then, by necessity, I had to run. I looked back to see the man stumble and fall. I thought that in his drunkenness he did not know what he did. I ran for many blocks, not caring if I would be seen, but only to escape from that man. I passed a group of sailors, who were talking and laughing loudly outside another cantina. But they took no notice of me. When finally I became so tired I had to stop running, I looked back and saw no one following me. I wished then to be home in Pancho Villa, sleeping in my bed. Among the warehouses and cantinas I had nowhere to rest.

The walk after that seemed endless. The warehouses and large industrial buildings ended. At the first signs of light, I had entered an area of streets with houses and shops. With the light, the shadow of the unknown began to disappear, but the shadow of la migra grew even larger.

I was so tired that my thoughts were unclear. Previous resolutions were discarded. I decided to continue to walk through San Diego during the day. My plan always had been to travel at night. But I could see nowhere to hide. I thought that to stop, try to hide, rest, and then walk through the city at night could arouse more suspicion than if I continued to walk during the day. As the

day brightened, I doubted my decision. It was Saturday, and people were stirring around their homes and shops. I felt that the eyes of everyone I saw were fixed on me. The blanket roll I carried said, "Here is un pollo."

The boulevard I walked along was becoming busier as stores began to open. The siren of a police car grew louder behind me. I froze beside the wall of a furniture store. The car screamed past and stopped suddenly in the block ahead. I walked quickly back and down a cross street, turned north again along a street lined with houses. A few people working in their yards looked at me. One man stared at me for a long time before entering his house. Others just looked briefly and continued their work. After walking several blocks, I returned to the boulevard. The police car was nowhere in sight. As I continued along the highway, I wondered about my detour. Was I being overly cautious? No, I thought. I could not be too careful. But I was afraid. Yet I could do nothing except walk wearily on.

When I found the highway that would take me north, I felt more at ease and walked to the west of it. I passed many houses that morning. All were finer than those of Pancho Villa, but only a few compared to many in Chapúltepec. The houses had more space around them than those of Tijuana. Green lawns and yards spread everywhere. I wondered if they were always so green or only this time of year, when all the hills were green. In the city, many of the yards were kept as carpets, and I wondered if immigrants like Raúl kept them that way. I thought if I were to paint what I saw, I would use much green for yards and white for the houses. This place was not like Pancho Villa, where I would have used much brown to paint the dirt roads and wood of the houses, or black to show it as it was after the fire. Each new sight became a memory to be stored, and I continually thought how I would draw what I saw. Already, I had forgotten that I could not draw, but looked at everything as framed pictures. The wonder of the new sights filled



my mind and chased away, for a while, the twin shadows of *la migra* and the unknown.

Late in the morning, I walked some distance away from the highway to cross another large highway that passed beneath it. After I crossed the highway, I continued to walk along another busy road which climbed a hill. Upon reaching the top, I found, to my amazement, a vast and grand park. It was covered as far as I could see by a carpet of grass. Large buildings along roads intersected the park. But even with these interruptions, there seemed to be more grass than I had ever seen before, except in the fields and hills around Tijuana in winter.

As I walked through this quiet and peaceful place, I became even more weary, and hunger cramped my stomach. I had walked all night and most of the morning. In an isolated place, I found a group of large bushes, next to a tall tree, where I could sit, rest, and not be seen. For the first time since leaving Pancho Villa, I rested and ate some of the food I had brought. After I had eaten, I could not fight off the need to sleep. I lay down with my blanket for a pillow and slept.

When I awoke, I sat up and looked quickly around to see if I had been discovered. But no one was nearby. Because clouds remained in the sky hiding the sun, I did not know the hour. But I knew I must continue my journey north. I walked in the direction I thought led to the highway. After leaving the park, I came upon fine houses, mansions finer than any in Chapúltepec, with yards like small parks. When I walked by them, I felt conspicuous, like a beggar in Chapúltepec. Also, I began to doubt that I was going in the right direction. There was nothing to tell me which way to go. And I wandered about, wondering what to do.

At one large house, which was set far back from the street, un latino worked in the yard. I remembered Raúl saying that he had worked in yards around houses in San Diego. I watched the man as he knelt to pull weeds from around a flower bed. He was young

like Raúl but shorter, with broad shoulders and darker skin. He wore a dark green shirt and pants and a tan baseball cap. Maybe he could help me, I thought. My choice was to take a risk and ask him for directions or continue to wander. I decided to approach him, because I knew I could wander no more.

In Spanish I asked, "Can you tell me the way to highway 15?"

He looked up at me, stood, and brushed dirt off his hands. "You are not far from it," he said in Spanish. "Go about six or seven blocks that way until you reach a busy boulevard," and he pointed in the direction I was walking. "Then, turn right and follow that boulevard for another six or seven blocks, and you will find the highway. When you find it, turn to the left to go north or to the right to go south."

Anxiety left me, and I was joyful to know the way. "*Muchas gracias,*" I said and turned to go. I thought the man had returned to his work, but instead he called to me.

"*Amigo,* if you go north, be careful in the canyons. Stay out of sight. And many miles ahead, where there are no houses, the road follows a canyon and rises up a hill that is covered with large rocks. There, *la migra* waits and blocks the road. You must take care. Climb the hill and go around." He smiled and said, "*Buena suerte!*" and returned to his work.

I followed his directions, found the highway as he said, and continued my journey north. I felt good to have spoken with someone in my own language and to have him smile at me. For the first time since I climbed the fence and dropped into el Norte, I felt that I would reach Los Angeles, even though it was far ahead of me.

## CHAPTER 15

---

DARKNESS CAME with the city behind me. The road I walked along rose and fell following a canyon with hills on both sides. By walking beside the road, I could not be easily seen, and I could escape from someone who might try to stop me. In the dimness of the night, I stopped at a grove of eucalyptus trees that grew back from the road where there were no houses. I sat by a tree within the grove, where I was hidden from the road. I felt safe, but I was tired and very hungry. I ate some tortillas, dried meat, and a little cheese, but I wished for a hot meal like my mother made. I thought of home, and for a while wondered if I had made the right choice by leaving. Loneliness swept over me. But I remembered the looks of my father, and my resolve to continue returned.

After I had eaten, I leaned back against the tree. I had walked many kilometers since I left Pancho Villa, and I did not want to walk any more. But I knew I must travel at night and rest in a hiding place during the day. I forced myself to my feet, returned to the highway, and continued to slowly walk beside it. When cars approached, I moved to the side so that I could not be seen. As the night grew older, fewer cars came, and I made fewer attempts to hide. After I passed flat, open country leaving two airfields behind, I walked as one sleeping, almost without feeling.

I do not know the time of night when I could go no farther, but the hour must have been early in the morning, because there were no cars on the road. Out of the darkness appeared an old house, set back from the road and surrounded by neglected wild bushes and trees. I approached the house cautiously. It was made

of wood and had burned. Only half of the house stood, covered by a roof. The remainder, charred by the fire, had collapsed. All the windows were broken.

I walked quietly around and looked inside the doors and broken windows. The dim light of night made seeing difficult, but I saw no one there. Through a side door, I cautiously entered the part of the house that remained standing. Inside, holes pierced the walls and ceilings. Where the fire had been, the roof had collapsed, the walls and floor were burned. In the part that still stood, papers and bottles were strewn about the floor, and a worn, dirty mattress lay in one corner. This place was a refuge used by other migrants. I wondered if other *pollos* used it and if *la migra* looked for them here. I doubted its safety. But I was very tired and decided to stay anyway. Instead of sleeping on the mattress, I chose a place in the dirt in the charred part of the house under the fallen roof. It was below the floor of the remaining room. I could sit in the dirt under the collapsed roof and see into the room by looking between burned boards. Behind was a hole in the wall that could not be seen from the room. If needed, I could escape through it. After choosing the place to sleep, I brushed charred wood from the spot, spread my blanket, and fell on it. I was asleep almost before I felt the ground.

A murmur of voices and the smell of cigarette smoke awakened me. I lay quietly for a moment, fearing to move. I glanced quickly from my hiding place into the room. Dim light from a cloudy sky shone through the broken windows. The time seemed to be late in the afternoon, but I did not know the hour.

Two men sat on the mattress in the corner of the room. An old man with long hair the color of beach sand sat with his back against the wall, facing my way. His face was red and puffy, and he was dressed in a long black coat. He drank from a bottle and handed it to a man sitting next to him on the mattress with his back against the other wall of the corner. The other man took the

bottle and drank. He was dressed in dirty and torn brown pants and coat. Greasy black hair, streaked with gray, lay flat against his head, and stubble covered his face. He handed the bottle back to the old man and talked to him quietly, with a deep voice in words I could barely hear.

The one who wore brown sat up straight, took out a knife and the blade sprang out. He showed the red-faced man the knife and made a thrust in the air in front of him at an imaginary person, while he held out his other hand with the palm up. Both men laughed. The man in brown then leaned back against the wall, folded his knife, and put it away in his pocket. He took out a cigarette, lit it, turned in my direction, blew smoke, and spat.

When he turned to look my way, I quickly put my head down and quietly pushed myself farther back beneath the fallen roof. As I lay there listening, the murmur of voices continued, and I knew that I had not been detected. But I knew that they must be bandits who rob with their knives. Maybe they were even as bad as those from Colonia México who had killed the Guatemalan. I had not expected bandits in los Estados Unidos so far from the border.

I lay as quietly as I could and wished for darkness to come, so that I could escape by the back way. I waited and waited, listening to their talk and smelling their cigarettes. I continually watched the door and windows of the room where the men sat. Would the night never come? Finally, the light began to fade, and slowly, very slowly, the room inside the house became dark. The hole in the wall behind me was almost hidden by darkness.

The murmured voices quieted. I waited for complete darkness and then waited some more while the men remained silent. Slowly, quietly, I rolled my blanket with the food bag and water bottle inside. I turned to crawl toward the hole in the wall and looked up to see the man dressed in brown looking back at me. I scrambled for the hole, pushed through it, and ran from the house toward the highway. Behind me I heard a loud shout followed by laughter.

I did not stop running for at least two kilometers. I walked to catch my breath, then ran north again until I could run no more. Although I still felt frightened by the two men and tired from my watch under the roof of the house and the run, I was invigorated by the cool night air. I felt very relieved to be out in the open again.

I walked beside the road that ran through grassy hills, which I could see only faintly in the light from the cars. For a time, I saw only a house here and one there. Then I came upon a large group of fine houses. They seemed misplaced so far from the city. I felt uneasy there and hurried past them. Because it was a large village, I took a long time to pass it. What did so many people do so far from a city? I wanted to look inside the homes to see the people and to know what it was like to live in this place, where the people knew each other. They had a community that I no longer had. Loneliness surged through me. I missed my friends in Pancho Villa and at my school. After passing the group of houses, I walked along the road where again there were few houses. Although still embraced by loneliness, I felt more at ease from discovery by *la migrá*. But soon, I approached another city.

First houses, una gasolinera, then shops stood beside the road. This was no small city. The farther I walked into it, the bigger it became. At that early hour in the morning, I saw no others on the streets. Occasionally, a car passed by. The lights from the cars shone on signs along the road and in the city. The name of it was Escondido, which is "little hidden place." But it was no hiding place for me. I felt that I was the only one walking in this sleeping city, and any eyes awake at this early hour were watching me.

Light began to appear in the east as I neared the northern edge of the town. Una gasolinera had just opened, and I filled my bottle with water, while the attendant looked another way. When the houses and shops were behind me, the road became lined with thick brush on both sides. I wondered why the hills before were grassy and these had thick brush. What conditions could make

such a difference? It was only one of many questions I had about what I saw as I walked north.

The road was becoming busy with cars, when I climbed into the brush away from it and into a ravine. I found a flat place surrounded by large brush to hide, sat down, and wrapped my blanket around me. I ate again. Overhead the sky remained cloudy and gray. This resting place was primitive with no evidence of man anywhere. No sound of cars on the road could be heard. I was completely alone.

For a brief time, I was glad to be alone, away from threatening men, and to eat some of the food I brought. I shuddered to think of the men in the burned house, the drunk who followed me when he left la cantina near the warehouses, and those in the car who shot at me. I put them from my mind and thought of times past when I enjoyed being alone, to sketch, to draw something I had seen. But most of my sketches were of people I had seen, of houses where people lived. As I thought about my sketching, lying in that lonely place, I realized for the first time that, despite the frightening encounters of the past few days, I wanted to be with people. It was an intense feeling. I knew that I needed to be among other people. Lying beneath a large bush, my blanket pulled around me, I fell asleep with thoughts of my family, friends, la playa, Raúl, and Oro, and wished again for such companionship.

## CHAPTER 16

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WHEN I WOKE, clouds hid the faint light in the sky. The day was almost gone. I ate, shook my blanket, and rolled it. I felt stiff from sleeping on the hard ground, but while I made my way back to the highway, the stiffness vanished. The walk that night was without incident. There were few houses along the way and few cars on the road, which rose and fell through hilly country.

Early in the morning, before the sun showed its light, I found myself in a country of hills covered with avocado trees. I chose a grove of trees and walked in among them about a hundred meters from the road, where I could not be seen. Tired from the journey of that night, I sat in the grass beside a tree, ate some food, looked around to assure that I was alone and safe, then pulled my blanket around me and slept.

In my dreams I heard voices, but saw no one. When I awoke, two men stood over me and looked closely at me. One spoke in my language, "Vicente, what do you suppose this is? Can avocado bugs grow so big? Or maybe he comes as a thief to steal the avocados."

"I think he is too late, Carlos. We have picked them already."

I jumped to my feet and said, "I do not come to steal."

They both laughed. But I did not wait to see what they would do. I grabbed my blanket, bag of food, and bottle and ran through the grove in a direction away from the road. They could easily follow me along the road. As I ran, I heard one call, "We mean no harm." But I did not stop. I ran up a small ravine that climbed a hill. After a few hundred meters, I rounded a bend. In the distance, an old man stood by an open fire in a camp with a shed against one



wall of the hill. He only stared at me and said nothing. The walls of the *barranca* were too steep for me to climb out of it. I turned back to find a way out and return to the road. I had started clawing up the steep hill when the two men who found me in the grove appeared on the path at the edge of the ravine.

One called to me. "Little runaway, we mean no harm." The man who spoke was tall and thin with bushy graying black hair and a large mustache.

His companion, a short and stocky man with balding head, said, "Carlos speaks the truth. I am Vicente. Where are you going?"

"I go north," I said. But I did not say where. These men could be bandits, or they could give me to la migra. "I seek work," I added.

"It is good you do not look for work here," said Vicente, "for there is none. How are you called?"

I looked down at the men standing in the path below. They made no attempt to pursue me and did not threaten me. I hesitated and then answered, "Ernesto."

Carlos smiled a big smile, so that his mustache rose up. "We have another Ernesto with us at our camp, but he is much older than you. The hour is late, young Ernesto. Have you eaten?"

I shook my head and said, "No."

"Then come with us to our camp and eat. Even now old Ernesto cooks. There is hot coffee and frijoles and even some meat."

At first, I did not answer. But both men smiled and beckoned for me to come down from the hill. As I looked at them, I felt skeptical. Would I be safe to follow them? I decided to follow them at a distance where I could escape if threatened.

They led me back along the path to the camp, where I had seen the old man by the fire. I hung back from the camp and looked at it. Against one side of the hill, the earth was dug out to form two walls of their dwelling. There were no other walls except posts and boards of wood that held up the roof, which was made of odd pieces of wood, tin, and cardboard. From the roof hung cloth

to make the other two walls. One of these curtains was pulled back to reveal a dirt floor with four cots, a table, boxes for chairs, and a crude shelf that held cans and bottles. I had never before seen such a poor house, even in Misión Sol. In the ravine below the hut, they had discarded their trash of cans, paper, and anything else they did not want.

When Vicente saw me look at it, he shrugged, and his neck disappeared into his broad shoulders. "We must leave it here. If we take it somewhere, we could be detected."

"Vicente knows about detection," Carlos said. "He has only now returned from México after la migra took him, with Juan, while they walked by the road."

"And Juan?" I asked. "Where is he? Is he here, too?"

"No," said Vicente. "He remains at home, a vacation by bus provided by la migra," and he laughed. "He will return in a few weeks or later when we go north to pick grapes and Valencia oranges. And when he has seen enough of his wife and children." And he laughed again.

Old Ernesto, a small, thin man with gray hair, cooked the food at the fire, which was surrounded by stones and covered with a grate. I smelled the coffee and food and suddenly became very hungry. But my attention went from my hunger to the man who cooked. His face appeared very old with lines around his tired and sad eyes. A flash came to my mind; I wondered if I saw myself in a future time.

"Ernesto," said Carlos. "We have a visitor, another Ernesto, a migrant who goes north. He will eat with us tonight."

"Another Ernesto?" asked old Ernesto. He welcomed me to the camp, to a place by the fire.

The smell of the food and coffee and the friendliness of the men melted my reluctance, and I joined them at the camp.

Vicente poured coffee for all of us, while old Ernesto finished

cooking. The warmth of the coffee felt good, and for the first time since I left Tijuana, I relaxed and felt safe among other people.

As we stood around the fire drinking coffee, Carlos said, "Tell us, Ernesto, why do you go north? To join family?"

"No," I answered. "There was a fire in Tijuana, and my home was destroyed. My parents need money to rebuild. I have come north to work."

"Your parents let you go?" asked Carlos.

I hesitated. "No. I wrote a note for them before I left ... late at night when they slept."

The men were silent for a few minutes, glancing at each other and me. Then Carlos asked, "Tell us, Ernesto, how has your journey been?"

"It has not been easy," I said. "I have been attacked by dogs and shot at. The walk by night has been difficult and tiring without light to see where to step. And two nights ago I stayed in a place where two men talked of robbery."

Carlos pulled a box from the shack, sat down on it, and stretched out his long legs. "Shot at?" he asked.

I described what happened.

"You were fortunate," said Vicente, shaking his head.

Ernesto served the food in paper plates, and we all sat on boxes to eat.

"What was this place where you saw the robbers?" asked Vicente, and his face showed concern.

I told him of the house and the two men I saw there.

Carlos said, "You have already encountered more dangers than most of us do. You may encounter even more on your journey north. You must trust no one."

I smiled and said, "But I trusted you, and now I have this fine meal."

Carlos looked at me with hard eyes. "Listen to me, Ernesto.

Trust no one. You should not have trusted us. We could have led you away from the road and done you great harm.”

I looked at my food and said, “I will do that, Carlos, but this time I have found friends.”

For a few minutes we ate in silence. Then, I asked, “Do you return to México often?”

They all nodded.

“About once a year,” said old Ernesto. “More often if la migra find us.”

“Are your trips north always difficult?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” said old Ernesto, and his eyes told me that he thought back about the times he had come north across the border. “I have come here for many years. The first few times were hard. To keep from being caught, I have had to jump from moving trains in Mexico and in el Norte. I have been caught by la migra and returned to Mexico. But now I know how to come here, and I have friends in places along the way. There is a house near the border in los Estado Unidos that I first stopped at a long time ago to ask for water. The man and woman there gave it to me and a bottle to take with me. Every year since then, I have stopped there, when I come and when I go, even though three different families have lived there. Every year when I return to México, I always take something to that family, sometimes fruit, sometimes avocados or something else I may think of. Once I brought cloth to the woman, which made her very happy.” Old Ernesto looked at the dying fire and was silent.

“Ernesto has returned here early this year,” Carlos said as he pulled his legs up under his chin. “There is not much work now. We have picked the winter avocados and the navel oranges. But Ernesto needed more money.”

Old Ernesto nodded. “My wife is ill, and there is money owed. There is little work here now, but I have found some. Even now there is more work here than at home. There are weeds to

cut, and work around the homes of the *Anglos*. Many know me, because I have come here for so many years. They know I work hard. The work is better here than in the valley to the east, where it is hotter, and there is much bending to pick the lettuce and other vegetables.”

“There is work here for us who are known by the *Anglos*,” said Vicente. “And they pay fair wages.”

I looked at Vicente, hunched up, sitting on a box, and at Carlos with his legs pulled up under his chin and at old Ernesto, who continued to stare at the glowing embers. I looked at the shack they lived in and the trash-strewn ravine. I asked myself, How could these men be paid fairly and live as they do?

Carlos saw my look and said, “We live here now to save money. Later, if we continue to work here, we move into a room in town. Or we go north, where we live in a room when we pick grapes and *Valencias*.”

The food that Ernesto cooked tasted very good. It reminded me of Mexico. When I finished eating, I sat on the ground and leaned against the post of the shack and thanked my new friends for their hospitality.

“It is good we found you today,” said Vicente, who sat down beside me. “Tomorrow, Carlos is cook, and the food will not be so good.” He and Ernesto laughed. Carlos tried to refrain, but could not, and he laughed, too, raising his mustache.

“If I had stayed home for a few more months and Ernesto, too, you would cook alone, Carlos, and how could you stand the poison?” said Vicente.

“Yes, Vicente, it is true. And what of you? You could not stay home longer. Your family grows each time you return to our village. You must spend more time here to care for them. This year you had another son. Your children multiply faster than the money you make. The reunions, after these long absences from home, perhaps cause many problems.”

“It is true of us all,” said Vicente. “But we also all have fine houses in our village that we would not have if we stayed there.”

“Do your wives or families ever come here?” I asked.

The three looked at me, and their faces became serious. Ernesto spoke for them all. “Would we bring our families to live like this?” He looked at the shack and the ravine.

There followed a time of silence when I thought that the three men remembered their families, and I wished that I had not asked my question.

Then Carlos said, “In the valleys, where there are better places to live, some bring their families. And they all work in the fields.” He shook his head. “But that is not good. We work here only to build a better life in México. If we bring that life here, too, what have we? We would have to hide our families and only hope for a better life. This way we have more.”

“If Juan had his family here, how could he have a vacation with them?” asked Vicente.

“Someday, we will have enough money, and we will not have to come back,” said old Ernesto. But his sad look told me that he did not believe what he said.

When we finished another cup of coffee, Carlos asked, “Will you stay with us tonight, young Ernesto? You are welcome.”

“Thank you, no,” I answered. “I wish to continue north, and I prefer to travel at night.”

Carlos nodded that he understood. Then I told them of the gardener in San Diego who directed me to the highway, and I asked, “Do you know where la migra block the road? I have a map. Can you show me?” From my shirt pocket I took the map I had made and unfolded it.

The three men studied it by the light of the glow from the charcoal fire. Old Ernesto shook his head. He could not see the place on my map.

Carlos said, as he rubbed his mustache and scratched his

bushy head, “The place is here at the top of a hill. The road leading to it rises up the hill,” and he pointed to my map. “You will see the many large rocks on the hill beside the road. You must climb the hill on the left side of the road here to go around.” He showed me on the map. “The trip is much longer than along the road, but it is necessary to avoid la migra.”

Carlos and Vicente then guided me in the dark back through the ravine and grove of trees to the highway.

I thanked them for their kindness. And as I began to leave, Carlos said to me, “Ernesto, you have a long way to travel, and you will become very tired. Do not be tempted to ride the trains. Many do it and are caught, because there are men on the trains who work with la migra. Trust no one, and good luck on your journey.” His smile raised his mustache.

## CHAPTER 17

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WHEN I LEFT the grove to continue my journey north, I thought that Raúl had made a good choice to work in the city instead of in the fields and groves. I did not think his life could be worse than those of the men who shared their food with me. Warmed by the meal and the conversation, I found the walk easy early that night. I passed through hilly country, where the climbs did not seem difficult. Few houses lined the road. I did not feel threatened. As the hours crept by, fewer cars appeared, and I walked more along the road than in the ditches beside it.

Late in the night the walk became more difficult as the road rose steadily upward to hills covered by large rocks and boulders. This was the place Carlos described where *la migra* blocked the road ahead. I left the road and climbed over a wire fence to the west. Lights from a passing car revealed only a little of the lower part of the steep hill I needed to climb. I saw no path up the hill and began a difficult struggle up through thick brush. Unable to see in the darkness, I stumbled over large rocks and into bushes. Some of the bushes were as large as small trees, with branches that reached out and scratched my arms and face. I pushed through clumps of bushes on my hands and feet like some primitive animal, scurrying relentlessly to reach the top of the hill. I must cross this country quickly before *la migra* finds me.

When I reached the top, I put my hands on my knees and bent over until my breath returned. I then stood up and looked back toward the road. Darkness hid it. I stared in the direction I thought it was and stood staring for several minutes. Then lights



from a car traced its line. Crossing through this country, I would soon lose sight of it. I needed something to guide me over these hills in the right direction; otherwise, I could wander away from the path I needed. I could even circle back or blunder into the net of la migra.

Others must have made this crossing, I thought. There must be a path. I looked around but found nothing to follow. I searched ahead in the direction I needed to go. Clouds still covered the sky, blotting out light from the moon and stars, but in the distance, a light reflected against the clouds. The light must be of a city or town. I remembered that my map showed a town beyond the la migra trap. What was it? I could not see my map in the darkness. I thought for a few moments. Then, I remembered. Temecula! I knew no such Spanish word. Was it an Indian name or the name of a person? The name did not matter. The light of the town did. As I looked at the light of the town, I also noticed a faint light off my right shoulder. Could it be the la migra blockade? For several minutes I studied the lights. I now had my compass. I now knew the way across this country. But the light of the city was so far away. The trek ahead seemed daunting.

I had just started down the hill in the direction I needed to go when I stopped suddenly. Something frightening came into my mind — rattlesnakes. To be bitten by one in this desolate place, where there were no people and no help, could mean death. I had thought of snakes early in my walk north and had always been watchful when I left the road and where I rested and slept. But now I was in a dark wilderness. I imagined snakes everywhere. I knew that to make noise was the best way to avoid snakes. They would know I was coming and could slither away. But I also wanted to have something I could use for probing ahead and for protection. When I kicked the ground to make noise, my feet searched for a branch or stick I could use. I found one, but it was too small. A second one had many side branches that I broke off, leaving a stick about two meters

long. I used it to poke the ground ahead of me. Like a blind man with his cane, I pounded the path ahead to warn the snakes and to detect any trees, rocks, or bushes that might block my way.

Pound, pound, swish, swish, I swung my stick ahead of me. Then, I thought, does la migra, have sound detectors around their blockade? I had heard they were going to put them along the border. But I would rather be caught by la migra than be bitten by a snake. So I continued to probe and walked more quickly — poke, poke, pound, pound. I stumbled over a rock I did not detect and fell into a bush that added more scratches to my arms and face. I stood, surrounded by bushes, held my stick by my side, pushed through them, and stepped into a hole. No! Ohhhhh! I slipped and fell down a steep decline. Using my blanket roll and stick, I braced myself against the ground, rocks and bushes as I tumbled. Sliding against rocks and bushes, I reached the bottom of the hill. I sat there stunned for a few minutes. Inspecting myself, I found nothing more serious than more scratches that stung my legs and arms. I pounded my stick around me to warn any snakes and stood, using the stick for balance. I poked ahead in the direction I thought I must go.

A steep hill blocked my path. Just as I began the climb, I heard the first yip of a coyote. Answering yips followed. I climbed more urgently. Did coyote packs attack humans? I did not think they did, but I did not want to be in a place where I could not defend myself. When I reached the top of the hill, the howling of the coyotes seemed closer. Was that only because I was at the top of the hill? Where were they? Their calls seemed to come from many directions.

When I walked down that first hill, I lost sight of my destination. I could only see the lights of the town from the tops of hills. I wondered if I still walked in the right direction, since I had avoided obstacles to arrive at this hilltop. I looked around, found the light of the town and walked toward it — poke, poke, pound,

pound. The yips continued, but no closer. Would they smell the meat in my blanket roll and attack me like the dogs at the border? One more thing to worry about.

Down into another gully I slipped. Poke, poke. Skunk! I smelled skunk. I remembered when Hernan encountered a skunk under his house and tried to chase it away. The animal sprayed him, and nothing would take the smell from him. For days everyone could smell him from far away. His family made him stay outside the house. And we told him not to come to school. I did not want to come upon skunks. Would they move out of my way or were they stubborn, stay in my path, and spray me? I would have no way to clean myself, and la migra could easily detect me. Swish, swish, I walked around a small tree, its branches reaching out to hold me back. Down to the bottom of the gully, slipping on loose dirt, pushing past some small bushes. Skunk smell again. What other wild creatures are in these hills?

On the way up the hill, I reached a level spot. As I stepped onto it, I heard a rattle and froze. The sound came from near me to my right. I stood as a statue, my stick in the air. My father had told me, "If you hear the sound of a rattle, stand perfectly still. It is a warning. The snake will only attack if it feels threatened." The rattle continued for a short time, then stopped. Wait! Wait! I told myself. I remained completely still for several minutes, not even moving a finger. I wondered, as I stood there, Had I only heard the rustling of leaves? No, I knew the sound of a rattlesnake. I slightly shuffled my right foot. Nothing. I repeated the shuffle with my left foot. Nothing. I tapped my stick ahead, to the right, behind, to the left. Nothing. I very slowly shuffled ahead, pounding my stick. Slowly struggling to the top of the hill, I was shaking all over. Coyote howls sounded closer. But I did not worry about them. If they attacked me, I would throw all my food to them and whack them with my stick. I had already faced extreme danger and survived. What could be worse?

When I looked around, the town appeared closer. I am making progress, I thought. The hill ahead sloped gradually in what seemed to be open grassland to a bottom covered by bushes that I passed through easily. Up a gradual hill to the top where I sat down, rested, and drank from my water bottle. I could see the light from the town in the distance, and it was closer.

But something had changed. In my clamoring and pounding I had not noticed that all was silent. No coyotes howled. Had they run off to chase a rabbit? No skunk smell. Had all the wild animals left? Were they frightened of something? Pumas! Could there be pumas in these hills? Was one stalking me now? One could confront me or charge me from behind and jump on my back. He could watch me and wait for me to stumble as I had so many times already tonight. For a few minutes, I stood petrified as stone on that hilltop. But I knew I had to continue. More noise. I needed to make more noise.

Pound, pound, poke, poke, swish, swish, down the hill I went. Slipping, sliding, but not falling, slowly pushing past bushes, detecting trees and going around their branches. I pressed steadily on, fearing rattlesnakes more than imaginary pumas. More coyote howls far away. Skunk smell again. A hiss to my right. An opossum? A cat? A big cat? I looked in the direction of the hiss. Was that a pair of eyes? Could I see eyes in such darkness without light to reflect off them? I slapped my stick in the direction of the eyes. Slap, slap, pound. The eyes blinked and disappeared. Did I really see eyes, or did my great fear cause me to imagine them? Did I see real threats in those hills? Snakes certainly, but others? I did not know. I believed I must protect myself. I swung my stick wider and walked faster. No attack came.

Slap, slap, pound, poke, stumble, slip, push through bushes. Is that a tree? Poke, swish, sliding down, climbing up, pushing past. Pound, poke, swish, swish. For many hours I struggled up and down steep hills through brush where I never found a path.

Even with my stick I stumbled often. Undetected rocks tripped me. Brush and trees reached out and scratched at my arms and face and tore at my clothes. Step after step, minute after minute, hour after hour I struggled though the rough country, always alert for attack by wild creatures. Two more times I stopped to rest at the top of a hill, sighted my direction ahead, and drank from my water bottle.

When I thought I could not continue the fight against this country any longer, I stumbled down a hill, and the thick brush diminished. The lights of the town became brighter, the country flattened. I finally saw the town. Soon after, to my relief, I returned to the highway. I have described that night in only a few words, like the merest outline of a drawing. But if you could have seen the scratches on me, and my torn clothes, they would have told more than a thousand words how difficult was the walk that night.

At the road, I turned and looked back at the country I had passed through. A new feeling came over me. Before then, I had feared the twin shadows of the unknown and *la migra*. At that moment I lost my fear of the unknown. It was like a revelation. I had conquered the wild country in the darkness of night and been essentially unharmed. I thought, Never again would I fear the future. Some trepidation, yes, but not fear. I would be startled, have times of great despair, face fearful situations, but I would not fear the outcomes. I had confidence I would get through bad times as I did the brush-covered hills with their wild creatures.

Dawn came, and I faced the day with a new feeling of hope. But I needed to find a place to rest and began to look for shelter. I walked around the town center of houses, businesses in old wooden buildings, a few restaurants, a few small industrial buildings, and junkyards.

Farther north, I found where the road divided and took the road to the left, as Raúl told me he would do. Here, the land was

flat. Few bushes or trees grew. I felt exposed in the daylight with no place to hide.

In midmorning the clouds let loose the rain they had been storing. A few drops fell, followed by a steady, hard rain, like the rain after the fire in Pancho Villa. At first, the rain felt good to my scratched body, and it washed some of the dust and dirt from me and my clothes. But soon I was completely wet and very cold. I now looked more urgently for shelter, where I could rest and dry out. I thought of the house where I saw the robbers, and wished for similar shelter. I looked for an old, abandoned shack or fruit stand, as I had seen in some places along the road. But I saw none.

There were no trees that could shelter me from the rain, but trees are not good shelter. They have holes that do not stop the rain. The little bushes could provide me no protection. I continued to walk, hoping that the rain would stop or that I would find shelter. I could not stop and sit down in the road to wait for the rain to quit.

Small streams ran from the road, forming puddles and mud beside it. My shoes were soon wet and covered with mud, so I began to walk along the road instead of beside it. My blanket became soaked. Inside it, the cloth that carried my food was wet. I tried to protect my food by putting it inside my jacket, but I could not keep it dry there, as the rain penetrated to my skin.

Occasional cars sped by, spraying dirty road water on me. An old car stopped. The man who drove it beckoned me to ride. I was tempted, but I was afraid to be trapped in a car and taken to la migra. I remembered that Carlos had said to trust no one. So, I waved for the man to go on.

I trudged through the rain for a time that seemed like hours, until I thought I would surely find no shelter. Then, through the water dripping in my eyes, I saw in a distant field some abandoned cars. Here could be shelter from the rain.

I crossed the muddy field with soil like clay that stuck to my shoes, which grew in size and weight with each step. One of my

shoes stuck in the mud and came loose. I checked carefully the three American dollars I kept there. The money was wet and now muddy, but not ruined.

Of the three cars, one lay on its side and was burned. It could offer me no shelter. Another had no roof. The third had a roof, but all its windows were broken, and it was very dirty inside. The ripped front seats showed only springs. But the back seat still had some covering.

I stepped inside and sat on the back seat. It was an awful place, like a trash container, with paper, bottles, and glass strewn around. I brushed the seat clear of glass and trash and lay down. The wind blowing through the broken windows brought into the car cold and rain that pierced my wet clothes. I could not stop shivering. I listened to the rain pounding on the roof of the car, while the cold and my shaking kept sleep from me.

During my walk in the rain, I thought only of the minute-to-minute, hour-to-hour steps of my journey. I did not permit myself thoughts of home. But as I lay cold and shivering in that dreadful place, I thought of family and friends. Maybe I should return, I thought. But what would my father say to me? "What did you do, Ernesto? Did you work, Ernesto? Did you make money, Ernesto?" When I thought of my destination and the long distance yet to go, a return home as a failure made that destination seem not so far. Yet my imagination tried to take hold of me. But I would not let the unknown that I faced grow terrible imagined futures in my mind. That day and that time was bad, but it would pass, I told myself. While lying cold and downcast in the abandoned car, frightening images tried to take hold of me. I saw bandits with knives. I was thrown from trains and chased by *la migra* with dogs. But I dismissed each image as it came to me and replaced it with ones of reunion with Raúl.

Before that time in the old shell of the car, I did not think of such things. Instead, when I could see about me, I stored up

pictures in my mind to draw. I was tempted to travel by day to see the country around me better. As my thoughts centered on drawing what I saw, it did not occur to me that I could not draw when I left home.

As I lay on the seat of the car and my shivering diminished, I shut out all the awful thoughts and even ones of home and Raúl. I closed my eyes so I did not see the inside of the car. The seat had springs that stuck through the covering, and it was lumpy. I turned and twisted to find a comfortable position. The cold rain continued to pound like rocks striking the metal roof. It sprayed in the windows, wetting my head and feet. Darkness came and weariness finally overcame the cold. A long night of uneasy sleep followed. I woke often, sitting up, wondering where I was. When I recognized the car, I lay back down in despair and slept again.

In the morning I was awakened by a scratching sound. The rain had stopped, and the sun shone brightly through the car window frames. My bed was even more grotesque than I remembered. Trash and broken glass were everywhere. The seat I lay on was dirty and greasy. Cloth hung torn and dirty from the roof. My eyes followed the direction of the scratching. On the floor, just beneath where my head lay, a huge striped black and gray cat had found my food and was eating it. Its matted fur was scarred in places, exposing skin. Along its side, a piece of fur flapped as the beast moved.

Startled that such an ugly creature was so near my eyes, I jumped up on the seat. The cat hardly noticed me. I found a piece of glass and threw it, hitting the cat. It only hissed back at me and continued to scratch and chew at the sack and spill my food on the filthy floor. In anger, I threw a large bottle at him that hit him hard on his side. He screeched and fell back but immediately sprang back to the food.

I would not get my food back. It had been soaked by the rain and lay spread on the dirty car floor, being attacked by the scrubby



cat. Even though I was hungry, I could not think of trying to fight the cat to reclaim it.

I could not stay in that place any longer. As I picked up my blanket from the seat and my water bottle from the floor, I heard a noise from behind me. Outside the car, a red-faced man with long hair the color of beach sand, wearing a long black coat, reached through a window frame to grab me. I thought he meant to rob me. I hit him hard on his hand with my bottle. He yelled and, shaking his hand, pulled it back.

I turned to run from the car by the other door only to find the cat in my way. I did not hesitate but kicked him as hard as I could, as a fútbol defender would clear a ball aimed at the goal. The cat screeched and flew in the air. It twisted to land facing the door. In one leap it was back clawing and biting at the cloth that held the food. But I had passed him and ran from the car.

I looked away from the cat to run for the road only to collide with the man who wore brown. He grabbed my left arm. Dirty and with greasy hair, he smelled of liquor, tobacco, and sweat. These were the men I had seen in the burned house. I dropped my blanket and pulled away, but he would not let me go. I looked at his other hand, but it held no knife. Before he had a strong hold of me, I thrust the small of my water bottle into his belly. He gasped, bent over, and let go of my arm. I swung my bottle hard against his nose, jarring the bottle from my hand. He yelled, and his hands went from his stomach to his nose. And I ran from him.

My shoes grew larger with each step in the mud of the field, slowing my ability to run. After I had gone about twenty meters, I looked back to see if the men followed. But they only stood together, the old one by the one in brown, who still held his face. I thought they would pursue me or take a gun and shoot at me. But they chased me only with their words. Perhaps they thought I had nothing of value to rob. If so, they would have been correct.

I ran along the road even when I could no longer see the

wrecked cars, until I could run no more. Only then did I think of the shadow of la migra and the other shadow of the unknown. But I had seen a living shadow more hideous than ones that I had imagined. I had again escaped, and again I put away fearful thoughts. I forced myself to run again along the road and leave those two men and the ugly cat far behind me. But now I had no water or food. And I had also dropped my blanket.

## CHAPTER 18

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WHEN I STOPPED running from the drifters, I walked fast and sometimes ran again. After a time, weariness slowed my pace, and I walked more slowly. I passed through flat country, fenced for grazing cattle and raising alfalfa. Orchards of orange trees appeared here and there. Hills rose to my left and others far to my right. The clouds vanished, and the sun shone brightly.

Hunger and thirst gnawed at me. I could drink from hoses at gasolineras when they appeared along the road, but I could not depend on them for water when I needed it. There could be many kilometers between them. I needed another bottle. I had money to buy food and something to drink, but where should I buy it? I did not want to stop at a large market where Anglos shopped. I did not think I would be safe there. But where?

At midday, the road ran beside western hills which soon gave way to orange groves. I picked some ripe oranges and ate a few. Others I carried to eat later. Houses began to appear beside the road, and metal homes clustered together. Even churches stood along the road. At one point I saw a lake against the western hills. A large town spread along the road for a few kilometers. Signs told me it was Lake Elsinore. I walked fast and watched for la migra. I did not think I would be safe stopping at a market in that town.

Beyond the town, I stopped by a water pond rimmed with palm trees. As I rested under the trees and looked at them, I thought I might be far in the south of México instead of in los Estados Unidos.

There were many sights to see in this country, as I walked

through it during the daytime: far to the west, houses covered hills and spread to a valley; nearby, a yard was filled with wrecked cars; a cemetery. Scattered near the cemetery lay trailers and small houses built of different kinds of wood and concrete blocks. Many old and discarded things surrounded those houses. At one were piles of wood, a refrigerator. At another, a stove, a wrecked car. When I looked at this place, I thought of Pancho Villa, and loneliness suddenly returned. To take my mind away from thoughts of home, I made myself look at other sights and think how I would draw them.

For a while, the road passed through hilly country. One hill was covered with tracks where motorcycles had been ridden. Many sheep grazed on another hill. A brick factory sat back from the road. A fence surrounded piles of neatly stacked bricks. Beyond it, the hills were cut and carved where clay for the bricks had been removed.

While traveling that day, I stopped three times at gasolineras for drinks of water. The oranges provided a little food and drink, but by late afternoon hunger gripped me. I needed to find food and another bottle to carry water.

When the sun began to set, I came upon a small town. It had a few stores and una gasolinera along the highway, warehouses by railroad tracks, and a few houses along two side roads. On a side street a market, the size of a small house, sat beside a vacant lot. It was much like ones in Tijuana. Signs in Spanish were taped to its windows. Dirty stucco walls held a name in faded paint on the front and side. Another sign in front hung broken. This was the type of market I sought.

I was glad that I had brought six American dollars with me. I took the three dollars from one of my shoes and entered the store. Quickly, I went to the case where meat and cheese were kept and chose a package of sandwich meat, a small piece of cheese, and a package of tortillas. I took a bottle of Coke from a tall case that kept it cold. When I felt the cold bottle, I became very thirsty for a cold drink. Thinking of the food, I became even more hungry.

I took the food to a counter, where a small, thin, old *México*no wearing a neat apron waited. His eyes looked all over me, but his face showed no expression. When I gave him two dollars, which still had dried mud on them, he studied them carefully before he brushed off the dirt and put them in his cash box. He gave me a ten cent piece and another three cents in return, put my food in a bag, and gave it to me. Never once did he say a word to me. When I left the store, I saw him stare after me.

The look of the storekeeper brought caution back, and I walked quickly to the warehouses near the railroad tracks, rather than go to the road, where I could easily be seen. As I went, I took out a tortilla and some meat and ate.

I had gone only a short distance, when I heard a call, "Muchacho," from behind me. I looked back, but prepared to run. A young man, a *México*no, wearing jeans and a tee shirt and carrying a jacket, smiled a big smile. He called again, "Muchacho." When I saw his smile, I thought immediately of Raúl and then of the gardener in San Diego. I stopped and waited for him to come to me.

"You do not live in this place?" he asked in Spanish.

Looking at him closely, I saw that he was older than I first thought. "No," I said.

"Nor I. I wait for a train to take me north to work."

We continued to walk along the street by the warehouses, and I said, "I have been warned against riding the trains." I did not tell him that I feared *la migra*, because I did not know him. Was he a citizen of *los Estados Unidos* or elsewhere?

"My name is Miguél. I have traveled north often on trains and always without danger or being stopped by *la migra*. What is your name?"

"Ernesto," I answered.

We stopped, and he looked at me. "Ernesto, we are almost out

of this town, and I must leave you now. I return to catch a train, but first I must take your food.”

His words surprised me, for their tone was of conversation. They expressed no threat. I looked at him. He smiled at me and held out his hand. I looked around. The road ahead ended, and only one warehouse remained by the tracks. Beyond were empty fields.

“Do not think to run, Ernesto. I can easily catch you, and you will suffer, if you cause me to pursue you. Also, do not force me to produce my knife to show you that my request is serious.” Miguél stood, still holding out his hand, still smiling.

The words of Carlos, “Trust no one,” repeated in my mind. I had not heeded those words when I saw Miguél, because he seemed so much like Raúl.

I gave Miguél the bag of food, but as I handed him the bottle of Coke, I let it slip to the ground where some of it spilled.

Miguel picked it up and threw it hard against the wall of the warehouse. The bottle broke, glass shards sprayed into the street, Coke splattered on the wall and dribbled into the dirt. With a menacing look Miguel said, “Now, Ernesto, take off your shoes and let me see what other money you have in them.”

“I have none,” I lied.

“Take off your shoes.” Miguél pulled out his knife but did not open the blade.

I did as he said, showing the three dollars there. I knew then that he had watched me since I came to the town. He had seen me take money from my shoe and buy food at the market.

He put his knife back in his pocket. “Hand me the money.”

I did as he said.

He kicked my shoes down the road. “And now your pockets, Ernesto.”

I took out two oranges; the ten cent piece, the three cents, and the other American dollar fell to the ground. Miguél took the

oranges and put them in the sack. "Pick up the money and hand it to me."

Again, I did as he said.

"And now, Ernesto, continue your journey, but do not follow me. I do not wish to hurt you, but if you follow me, you will not be safe." Miguél turned, walked back along the road to the south, and passed from my sight between two warehouse buildings.

I was angry at Miguél. From my answer to his first question he knew I had no family or friends in that town. I was angry at myself for not heeding the advice of Carlos. Now, I had nothing. Here we were, Miguel and I, illegal Méxicano immigrants in los Estados Unidos where a different language is spoken. Should we not cooperate? Instead he preyed on me. It was another hard lesson. Great despair washed over me. I picked up my shoes, sat in the shade of the warehouse, shook the dirt from them, and put them on. I put my head down and wished that I was with Raúl. If I had been traveling with Raúl or another friend, this robbery would not have happened. My travels, which had been a nightmare, might instead have been a great adventure. But I was not with Raúl. To sit alone in this empty place and wish for something that could not be would do no good.

Then, anger turned into resolve. I knew I must get up and continue north. Even though I had many kilometers to travel, I was determined to do it somehow. But I had no food and no bottle to carry water. I took out my map and carefully unfolded it. The rain had wet it, causing parts to stick together. I tore it in two places, but when I opened it, I could still see the lines of the roads that I must follow. I measured how far I had traveled and how far I had to go. I had at least two days of constant travel to reach Raúl. To go back would take much longer. How could I travel two days without food and a bottle for water?

I returned to the main road and drank water at la gasolinera. I no longer tried to hide, but walked north along the road. As the

sun touched the hills to the west, a train moved slowly north with two engines pulling many types of cars: box cars, flat cars, and tank cars. After about fifteen cars had passed, Miguél rode on a flat car. He saw me and saluted me by raising the bag of food and a bottle he must have bought with my money. I did not return the salute, but only watched his car pass. To my surprise, two men sat in the open door of the following boxcar. One was the old man with hair like beach sand, wearing a black coat. The other dressed in brown.

I smiled to myself, looking at those three men so close to each other, men who carried knives and robbed. For a moment, I wished to be a bird, flying above that train, observing the workings of evil to evil. But I am not a bird and could only watch as the train passed from my sight. If I could fly, I would have flown instead to Raúl in Los Angeles. When night came, it found me continuing to walk the long distance that remained, searching the roadside for a bottle that I could use to carry water.



## CHAPTER 19

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DARKNESS CAME with a cold wind that blew against me. I held my arms around me and pushed on, eager to put that small town, where I had been robbed, behind me. I became even more angry at myself and Miguél. Despair again tried to take hold of me, but I fought against it. Instead, I peered through the darkness at the country along the road and looked for a bottle to carry water.

I passed dairies, a chicken ranch, a railroad overpass. Hills came close to the road. A sand and gravel pit appeared to the west. The hills gave way to flat ranch land where trees lined the road. The road widened, and then narrowed again at an abandoned fruit stand. More orange groves. More hills.

Before the night ended, I stopped at an orange grove and picked more oranges. I ate two of them and saved some for the next day. I rested and even slept for a short time in the grove. The oranges helped to stop my thirst but did little to stop my hunger. I found some bottles on the roadside, but none could serve to carry drinking water. Two were too dirty, one was broken, another was too small. Looking for a bottle occupied my mind and took away my thoughts of hunger.

When morning came, the road became a freeway, with a fence beside it, like the highway in San Diego. I followed it until it turned west at the eastern end of the small city of Corona. I walked north of the freeway along a road lined with businesses.

The sun made me thirsty. I ate another orange, but it did not quench my thirst. I found a drinking fountain in a park and rested briefly on a bench. Beside a trash can, I found a large plastic

bottle with a cap, partly full of soda. I dumped out the soda and sought una gasolinera, where I could wash it and fill it with water. At the first one, the room for men was locked. I used the water hose for another quick drink and to partially wash the bottle. At the second station, the door to the room for men was unlocked. When I entered, my reflection in the mirror shocked me. My hair was matted, and my face streaked with dirt. My clothes were torn, rumped, and stained from brush, mud, and road dust I had slogged through. I could understand why people I passed stared so strangely at me. I washed my face, smoothed my hair, and brushed off my clothes.

I had just finished washing the bottle and partially filling it with water when a man, wearing the blue uniform of a mechanic, entered the room. His hands were black with grease. He yelled at me in English. But I remember the words. "Get out, you damn Mexican! Get out!" Before he could put his dirty hands on me, I ran around him and fled through the door. He yelled after me, "Stay out, you damn Mexican!" I ran a short way down the road, but when he did not follow me, I continued trudging on.

The road turned north, again became narrow, and climbed a hill beside a dam. Hills rose to the west, and ranches with cattle grazing lay to the east. Then came freshly plowed fields, some fields with alfalfa growing, and another brickyard. The fields gave way to houses. I walked by houses that did not seem to end, and, by late afternoon, I reached the highway that I needed to follow west.

Beyond the highway to the north stretched kilometers of houses and shops in an almost endless blanket to the foot of the mountains that rose in the distance. The new highway was a freeway, like the one in Corona that morning and the one in San Diego. It was fenced so that I could not walk on it. Instead, I walked on roads that ran beside it. Sometimes, I walked a long time without seeing the highway I followed. I continued walking west into the sun until it dropped behind some hills. On that afternoon and into

the night, I could always see houses or shops, except twice when the highway crossed hills. I was in a city that had no end.

Earlier in the days on my journey north, the scenes I passed were sketched with fine lines in my memory so that even now, many years later, I recall their details.

The fierce look of the bearded coyote.

The bared teeth of the dogs that stalked me.

The green lawns of San Diego.

The burned house and the two drifters who slept there.

The condition of the camp of Carlos, Vicente, and old Ernesto.

The abandoned cars and the cat-beast.

The train that took Miguél and my food and money away.

A house with a crooked porch and peeling paint, standing alone in a field.

The magnificent wrought iron fence surrounding a very large house.

Three children, who stopped playing to stare at me as I passed by them.

A tree with two trunks, but only one tree standing alone in a desert place.

The face of a man outlined by hills.

A bush with beautiful blossoms in front of an old shack by railroad tracks.

With each sight I wondered what it would be like to live in that place. What would life be like to own a magnificent ranch, to watch over sheep, to make bricks, to grow oranges? What would it be like to be a citizen of this country, to live in it forever?

On the walk to the west, however, hunger weakened my legs and my eyes, for I saw no details and remember only the broad lines of the endless scene of house after house, shop after shop, car followed by car along the highways. I passed people of all kinds and did not see them. I hardly noticed their stares. I did not care if they stared. I only walked, step after step, with thoughts of finding Raúl.

Late that night, I slept in a thicket of bushes by a railroad track near large industrial buildings. The quiet was a relief from the endless traffic noise of the highways. At dawn, a passing train awakened me, and I continued my slow walk west. The large buildings were replaced by shops — so many shops. Their number seemed endless. How could there be a need for so many stores?

Beginning in the late morning, I looked for a boulevard that would place me very close to the house where Raúl lived. I searched the name of each street I crossed for Atlantic Boulevard, even small streets. Finally, in late afternoon, I stood beside it with cars rushing by in all directions. Great joy filled my tired and hungry body.

But a siren, the noise, and mass of traffic confused me. I had no instructions where to go from Atlantic Boulevard to where Raúl lived on Sandstone Street. It was near Atlantic Boulevard. But where? I did not know. I had not thought before about what to do after I found that boulevard. I walked slowly along it, wondering how I could be so stupid and what I should do. The street was lined with shops, and cars raced by in a blur. I knew that I could not walk without directions. I was so close to my destination. But how would I find it? Who should I ask?

I first asked a mechanic working on a car at una gasolinera. He said something in English I did not understand and pointed to a map on the wall. I studied the map for many minutes. It had crisscrossing lines of so many streets. I could not find what I looked for. The mechanic still worked on the car, when I told him I could not find the street. He yelled and waved his hand at me to go away. To stay would cause me trouble.

So I left, again to walk very slowly along Atlantic Boulevard. I wondered what to do next. I could be going in the wrong direction. I had wandered that way for a short time until the setting sun touched the tops of the tallest buildings to the west. The pain in my stomach told me that I needed to eat. I knew I must do something quickly, because I could not go on much longer.

I passed una cantina, where an old man leaned against the wall outside. He yelled something at me that I did not understand. I stopped to see if he would ask his question again. Old dirty clothes hung like bags on his thin frame. His hair was dirty and greasy black with streaks of gray. Words in Spanish came out of a lined face covered with sparse gray stubble. "Do you have some money for me, muchacho?"

Astonished, I looked at him again. He must be mad. Did I look like one who would have money? Clothed in rags? With a terrible ache in my belly? But then I thought he must ask everyone for money. I answered him, "No." Then I asked him in my language if he could show me the way to Sandstone Street.

"No," he said. "But maybe la cantina owner will know." He pushed me into the darkness of la cantina. I smelled the stale air and blinked my eyes to see. An argument in English and Spanish began between the old man and a man standing behind the bar, who I could not see very well. I did not understand all of the conversation. They were not good friends. La cantina owner did not want that old man or a boy who was too young in his cantina. He told us both to leave.

The argument continued for a few minutes, during which la cantina owner glanced at me. I could now see him, a tall, thin man with a thin face shaven clean. He must have taken pity on me because of my appearance. He asked me in Spanish what I wanted. I told him that I looked for Sandstone Street where my friend lived. Without saying another word or arguing with the old man, he searched through a drawer behind the bar and pulled out a map which he spread out on the bar. He turned on a light over the bar and studied the map for many minutes.

"Aha! Here it is!" he exclaimed, pointing his finger to a place on the map. "But it is very far from here." He then counted the streets. After he finished, he looked at me, "You must go to the south on Atlantic Boulevard nine blocks to Garnet Street. Then,

you must go west eleven streets to come to Sandstone.” He folded his map and told me to go. I thanked him and the old man. For the first time in many days I felt hopeful. As I left la cantina, the two men continued their argument.

The sun had dropped behind the buildings to the west, but I felt it shining on me. Now, I knew where to find Raúl and would be with him soon. I had not felt so joyful since before I left Pancho Villa. For a few minutes I forgot my weariness and hunger. I looked at the businesses along the boulevard and wondered if I might work in one of them: that restaurant, that car wash. Perhaps I could load and carry merchandise for that furniture store. There were many stores. There must be many work opportunities.

My mood began to change when I turned onto Garnet Street. I was now a stranger in a neighborhood of small houses. Across the street from where I walked, a white man watering his lawn watched me for the entire block. Two blocks later, boys playing ball in the street stopped until I had passed. I was glad they were not older. I could not run from any gang. I wondered who watched me from their windows. Would I suddenly be stopped, or worse, attacked? Relief spread over me when I reached Sandstone Street. Raúl was near, and I would be safe.

I searched the house numbers for the house where Raúl lived. I followed the street up a slight hill, where there were old stuccoed houses on both sides. Paint peeled from them, and some had gouges in the walls. In the block ahead, two men stood talking beside a parked car. Discarded items and refuse lay about one of the houses that appeared vacant. I felt very unsafe in this neighborhood. But I went in the wrong direction, because the house numbers did not approach the number I sought. I changed direction and found many small wooden houses. Although the paint on most was old, the houses appeared better than the stuccoed ones, and their yards were neater.

Darkness was coming when I found the house behind another, larger one that faced the street. Both were one story with

gray wood siding. Faded green shingles covered peaked roofs. The front house had a large porch with a partly collapsed railing. The house behind was smaller with a similar but smaller porch. A dirt driveway ran beside the front house to a garage with a room above it that sat beside the rear house.

I walked by the front house along the driveway to the rear house. Lights shone behind curtains in the windows. I would soon be in the house with Raúl. He would feed me, and I would be comfortable after days of extreme discomfort. I climbed the steps of the porch and knocked at the door. But there was no answer. I knocked again. No answer. I knocked louder. After a short time, a girl answered in English from behind the door.

I answered in Spanish. "I seek Raúl. I am his friend."

The girl replied in Spanish. "There is no Raúl here."

I was shocked at her words and responded, "But Raúl must live here. This is the street and house number he gave me."

"There is no Raúl here. Go away."

"Are you certain? Have you never known Raúl Arguello? I know this is the number he gave me."

"Go away, or I will call the neighbors."

On my entire journey north, I never thought that I might not find Raúl. I was as one struck by a club. I became speechless. Even wild dogs and bandits did not seem so horrible as this — to find myself alone so far from home and not know how to find Raúl. I had not eaten for two days and had no food. I was very tired, and my feet could walk no farther. I was wearing dirty rags. I had no hope.

"Go away, or I will call the neighbors," the girl repeated.

I walked slowly to the street and sat in the dirt beside it, my back against a telephone pole and my knees pulled up. I did not know what to do. I put my head down upon my knees and closed my eyes. If my wish could be realized, I would have been instantly transported back to Pancho Villa. Instead, my body continued to ache with hunger and weariness, as darkness enveloped me.

## CHAPTER 20

---

THE DARK surrounded me, filling my mind and body, increasing my loneliness. Hunger gnawed at my stomach. I tried to shut it all out. I felt so weary. I wished for sleep that would carry me away from this place, that would take me home. But I knew I would awake only to find myself the same, unchanged, still alone, still hungry. I could not think clearly. I could not think of anything else I could do to find Raúl. Weariness overwhelmed hunger. It swept away my loneliness, and I remember nothing, until I felt a large hand on my shoulder. “Muchacho, muchacho.”

I awoke in the darkness of night to find my limbs stiff and my neck aching from sleeping while sitting against the pole.

“Muchacho, muchacho, why are you here?”

I looked up at a broad but not tall man standing over me. I could not see his face well in the dark. Behind him were the shapes of two others, and one was a woman.

“Muchacho, ...”

Before the man could ask again, I rose. What could be done to me that I had not already suffered? Maybe these people would know of Raúl, or they could give me to la migra who would take me home. What a long and useless journey I have taken. “I only seek my friend, who is not here,” I answered.

“What friend?” asked the woman from the darkness.

“His name is Raúl.”

For a moment there was silence. Then, another voice came from a dark shape behind the broad man. “Ernesto, is that you?” The shape stepped forward, and Raúl looked at me.



“Raúl! Raúl is it you?” I asked, and I asked it again, because I could not believe Raúl was there facing me. My mind, which had been so blank with despair was overcome with joy.

“Raúl, is it really you?” I asked again.

“Ernesto, why are you here?” he asked.

Before I could answer, the woman said, “Raúl, is this Ernesto your friend?”

“Yes, Catalina. He is the brother of Teresa. He must have come from Tijuana.”

“Well, then, why do we stand in the dark street? Bring Ernesto to the house.”

They led me, as in a dream, back to the house where I had asked for Raúl. At the porch, a light shone on me. Raúl again asked, “Why have you come? How long has it been since you left Tijuana? By what path did you come?”

My numb mind and tongue could not answer immediately.

Before Raúl could ask again, Catalina interrupted, “Raúl, look at this Ernesto. His clothes are dirty and torn. He is unwashed. He can answer your questions later. Take him to your room to wash, and give him some of your clothes. When have you last eaten, Ernesto?”

“It has been two days.”

“You shall eat when you clean yourself. Take him, Raúl.”

We crossed over to the garage and climbed the stairs to a door over it. Inside was a cluttered room of four beds, piles of clothes, some shelves made of bricks and boards storing clothes, small chests of drawers. Raúl led me to el baño with a shower, toilet, and bowl with a mirror over it. When I saw myself, I looked carefully to see if the image was really me. As in la gasolinera, I saw matted and dirty hair and dirt on my face, hands, and arms. My clothes were rags, worse than those worn by children in Misión Sol.

I took off my useless clothes and showered. The warm water felt so good as it washed away bad memories of my trip north. I could

not remember a time when being clean felt so good. Afterward, as I sat on the bed of Raúl putting on clothes he found for me, I looked around. Across the room, piles of clothes lay beneath a rumpled bed. Pictures of naked women were taped to the wall over the bed. A guitar leaned against a small chest of drawers with a radio on top.

Raúl saw me looking there. "Romeo sleeps there. He thinks his name gives him privileges with women." He smiled. "They do not always agree. He plays the guitar and sings *canções de amor*, love songs, but very badly." He smiled again. "Even now he is probably in una cantina, or somewhere else looking for girls. He does not make enough money to have the fun he wants. Over there sleeps Juan." He pointed to a neatly made bed. Beneath it were packed bags. "He is leaving soon. He has steady work as a cook. He is gifted in preparing food, and sometimes he cooks for us. A coyote brings his wife and two children. He has found a small apartment where they will live."

"Is that not dangerous for his wife and children?" I asked, thinking of my own journey.

"Yes, but Juan thinks this coyote is a good one." Raúl looked at the bed next to the one where Juan slept. It, too, was unkempt, with clothes lying around it. "Jorge sleeps there. He is the friend of Romeo. They are probably together now." Raúl saw that I was now dressed. "Come," he said. "Catalina prepares your food. She is a good cook. You will be well fed. We have already eaten. We who live here in this room do not often eat with the Ortegons. So this will be a special meal." As I rose from the bed, he said apologetically, "We did not see you by the pole when we came home from work. Rosalia said someone came to the house looking for me, but the person did not leave his name."

"I am very happy you found me. I had lost all hope and did not know what to do."

As we walked to the door, I looked back at where Raúl slept.

Taped over his bed was a picture of a beach with bright sun shining on it. Beside it was the picture I had drawn of Teresa, creased where it had been folded when he carried it north. A chest of drawers stood next to the bed with a photograph of Teresa on it. She must have sent it to him after he left Tijuana. I thought about his room and what I saw. He left a real beach, which he saw every day, and Teresa, who he could touch and talk to, so that he could come here to work. I thought he must make much money.

We walked down the stairs from the room over the garage, and Raúl asked again, "Why have you come, Ernesto?"

"To work and earn money. Our family needs money."

Raul was silent for a moment. "That is not easy to do. How long have you been traveling? What has happened that you should be like this?"

"A week, six days. I cannot remember. It has been difficult." My mind was still hazy from hunger and weariness. "I came the way you showed me on the map, the way you were going. The traveling has been hard, Raúl. But I am happy to see you. At times, I thought I never would see you, but I stopped thinking that way, or I never would have come this far. When I came here and was told you were not here, I lost all hope for everything."

"Rosalia did well. Do not blame her. Her father and mother work, and she has been told not to speak with strangers and not to say anything about us in the room up there."

At the door of the house, the broad man welcomed me. "Come, Ernesto, and eat. I am Enrique." He appeared to be the age of my father, because gray was at his temples and spotted through his wavy black hair.

I glanced around the front room. It was furnished better than any home in Pancho Villa. There was a sofa, coffee table, and two chairs. In the corner was a television set, and a telephone sat on a table by a chair. Enrique looked at me, wrinkles on his forehead, as though he thought deeply about what he saw. Catalina, of medium

height and slim, her arms crossed, her face staring seriously at me, appeared strong as she stood by Enrique. Behind them stood three children, a girl of maybe thirteen and two younger boys. The boys stared at me, but I saw a smile on the face of the girl. I did not know the meaning of her smile. The whole scene was covered by a light haze caused by my weariness and hunger.

Enrique spoke again. "Rosalia, my daughter," and he brought her forward, "began the meal, and my wife, Catalina, has finished it. Tonight, we have chicken made better than you have ever eaten it." His face smiled at me. "And these are my sons, Ramón and Luís. Now, come to the kitchen."

All the family smiled at me and led me to the kitchen. We all sat around a table while Catalina served food only to me. I felt strange to be eating while others only watched. But Catalina said, "Eat, Ernesto, eat."

Hunger raged within me. I tried to be polite, but the food was such a delight that I began by gulping it down. Between bites, I answered questions. First, I told of the journey. I told of the dogs that pursued me at la frontera and the coyote who caught me and pointed the knife at my chest. I told of the car and the gunshot, the half-burned house and the two bandits. When I told of this, Enrique shook his head quietly. All were now quiet, listening to me. The eyes of the two boys were wide. Ramón, the oldest, maybe eight years, watched me with a serious expression. Luís, maybe six, heard only part of my story. He could not sit still.

I told of the kindness of Carlos, Vicente, and old Ernesto and of their work. Catalina and Enrique looked at each other with expressions that said they knew such men and their work.

I told of the hard trek around the la migra blockade, the rattlesnake, the rain, and the abandoned car. And I told of Miguél, who took my food and money. Finally, I told them of my walk through the city without end. Then, I told of being directed here to this house and my despair at not finding Raúl.

Rosalia said, "I did not know."

"You could not," said Catalina.

I nodded and smiled at Rosalia. She smiled back.

"But why did you come, Ernesto?" Raúl asked again.

"To make money for my father and mother," I said. "There was a fire in Pancho Villa, and our house was burned. Then, the rains came." I began to tell them of it, but Raúl interrupted me.

"Teresa wrote me about it. We all know about it."

"Did she tell you Oro died and others, even Alicia García?"

He looked startled at the news, and sadness filled his face. "No. She only said that your father was rebuilding your house."

"It was a terrible fire, Raúl. We lost everything, as did many others. The Garcias moved to Misión Sol. Did you know?"

"No." A stunned look remained on his face.

"My father is rebuilding the house, and my mother and I helped him. But he watched me, and I know he wanted me to do more, to earn more money for the things we needed. I tried to find work, but I earned little money. You know how hard it is to find work in Tijuana. I felt that I must do more." I did not tell them of the request of señora García for a drawing of Alicia and Oro.

When I finished my story, Enrique was shaking his head. "Work is not easy to find, Ernesto, especially for one as young as you."

"But I am tall and strong and can do many things that my father has taught me. Also, I do not look young."

"Maybe, Ernesto, but you will not find work easily," said Enrique.

I saw Rosalia smile at me again. I looked down at the remaining food and continued to eat. Was she mocking me?

Silence followed. I knew they saw before them a burden, but I did not know how to argue against it. My hunger was gone, but now my mind reacted very slowly. Listening and speaking were becoming difficult. Weariness was overcoming me.

Catalina broke the silence. "You must write to your father and mother and tell them you are well."

I held my head in my hands, trying to stay awake. I heard her words again.

"You must write to your father and mother and tell them you are well."

Unyielding weariness overcame me. I put my head on my arms on the table. I was very rude and impolite, I know, but I could not help it. After that, everything in that room went blank.

## CHAPTER 21

---

I REMEMBER VAGUELY being helped up the stairs to the room over the garage, falling on a mattress, a blanket put over me. Darkness. Then, light and voices. Noise from el baño. Darkness.

When I first woke, light shone in the windows. Noise surrounded me. I lay on a mattress on the floor near the bed of Raúl. But I saw little else, because I could not keep my eyes open. I slept again and dreamed of dogs, cats, and bandits chasing me. A coyote threw his knife at me. Miguél smiled menacingly at me. I ran from them, but my legs would move only with great effort. I looked for Raúl but could not find him, even though I looked and looked. While I looked, a bandit pointed a gun at me. I heard the bang, bang of shots and my name being called.

I woke and tried to shake off the dream. But the banging continued. “Ernesto, Ernesto. It is Rosalia. Are you there?”

“I am here.” No one else was in the room. I crawled from the bed, my head foggy as *la playa* in May, stumbled to the door and opened it.

Rosalia stood outside and looked at me with puzzlement.

I looked at myself. My clothes were wrinkled from sleeping in them. I felt my hair and brushed it with my hand.

“My mother has some clothes for you,” said Rosalia. “They are from a neighbor. They should fit you better than those.” She pointed at the clothes that Raúl gave me.

“Thank you.” I took the clothes.

“Have you slept all this time? It is now afternoon.”

I nodded.

“You must have been very tired from your journey.”

“Yes, but now I feel much better.”

Rosalía wore a white blouse and a colorful flowered skirt. She had large brown eyes and black hair to her shoulders. Her smile was wide, which made her appear kind. I thought she was very pretty.

“I must go back to finish my school work, and later I will help my mother with the meal. Today is Saturday. Did you know?”

I shook my head. During my journey, the days and nights had become one, and I had kept no account of time.

“My father, his friend, Gilberto, and Raúl work today collecting cardboard. When they come home, we will eat, and my mother invites you to come.” She quickly added, “The men who stay here find their own meals. She also gives you this to write a letter to your father and mother.” She gave me paper and a pencil, but did not look into my eyes.

When she left, I washed and changed to the new clothes: tan pants and a blue long-sleeved shirt. They fit me well. There was a pair of socks, too. But my old worn and scuffed shoes, which I washed, would have to do.

As I changed clothes, I looked again at the photograph of Teresa and the creased picture of her that I had drawn. I thought I should draw a better one, showing the brightness that was Teresa. No thought came to me that I could not draw.

Seeing the pictures of Teresa made me think of home. I sat at the small chest and wrote to my father and mother. I did not tell them all that had happened on my journey, but that I was with Raúl and that I would stay and work in el Norte. I told them I would send them money for the house after I began to work.

When I finished the letter, I came outside and sat on the steps by the door. The day was bright and warm. I leaned my head against the garage wall, closed my eyes, and felt the warmth cover my body. My mind was at ease for the first time in many days. I could hear birds calling and children playing in the front house



yard. I felt at peace. I heard the door of the Ortegon house close and opened my eyes. Rosalia carried a plate of food to me.

"From my mother," she said.

Only then did I realize how hungry I was. "Thank you," I replied. The plate held tortillas, chicken pieces left over from the meal last night, and frijoles. I ate a few bites. "This is very good. I have been so hungry." After I ate some more, I asked, "Have you finished your school work?"

"Yes. I finished most of it last night."

"Is the work difficult? Do you have to speak in English?"

"The work is not difficult for me now, because I like it. We speak English in school, but I have no trouble now, because I learned it well long ago. At first, school was difficult, because I spoke no English. Some of my friends still find it so. Also," and she stopped to think what words to say, "the books teach Anglo ways, not *México*. I think some teachers do not respect *Méxicanos*." She paused again and then added, "But my mother says it is important to do well in school, so I can have good work after I finish. Will you go to school when you return to your home?"

"I do not intend to return. I will stay here and work."

Rosalia was silent. Then she said, "You are like other boys I know, who only talk of work and of leaving school as soon as they can. They do not see the future."

"And what do the girls talk about?"

"Many things ... school ... clothes ... parties." She looked at her shoes, smiled, and added, "boys."

There was silence between us for a moment. I looked around at the yards and houses. "Who lives in the front house?"

Rosalia looked relieved at my question and answered, "señor and señora Martinez, their seven children, and the grandmother of the children. Señora Martinez sews clothing, as does my mother. Señor Martinez works in another factory, but he is a cutter. Cutters make much money. The grandmother looks after the children

when the parents work.” After we watched the children playing for a moment, Rosalia said she must go. She took the plate and returned to her house.

“Tell your mother thank you for the food,” I called to her.

Feeling much refreshed, I explored the streets nearby. From the position of the sun, I learned which were east and west streets and which were north and south. I found Atlantic Boulevard again and saw where many of the stores were. There must be much need for workers, I thought. I saw myself working for many of the businesses. I also looked at the people on the streets, what they wore, who they walked with, where they went. All the time I was cautious and looked for *la migra*, but I heard Spanish spoken among the many Latinos I saw. And for moments, I felt at home.

As the sun began to fall behind the hills to the west, I returned to sit on the stairs leading to the room over the garage. When darkness came, señor Ortegon drove his truck into the driveway. His friend Gilberto spoke briefly to him, went quickly to his car, and left. Raúl came to the room above the garage which soon became a chaos of men returning from work, changing clothes, using *el baño*, talking about what they would do that Saturday night. Juan prepared to leave. His wife and children had safely arrived, and all were saying good-bye to him.

Jorge and Romeo dressed to impress the women. Well, Romeo dressed so. They were a contrast. Jorge was tall, husky, and had dark skin. He wore jeans and a dark brown shirt and carried a jean jacket. He did not take much care with his clothes. Romeo was shorter and thin, with light skin. He wore black slacks, a striped black and brown shirt unbuttoned to his chest, and shiny black shoes. He spent much time in front of the mirror admiring himself, combing his hair, and clogging the bathroom, which was too small for all of the men.

To escape the turmoil, I left the room and sat on the steps

outside until they were gone. Then, Raúl and I ate with the Ortegons.

After we had eaten and sat in the living room, señor Ortegon said, "Ernesto, I see that you have written a letter to your father and mother. That is good. Now, we must decide how you will return to your home."

I was surprised to hear him say that. "I do not wish to return. I did not come all this way to say hello to Raúl only to turn around and return. I will work here."

"And how will you get work?" Señor Ortegon looked at me with a very serious face.

"I have seen many businesses around here. There must be much work."

"Oh? And do you have papers?"

"Papers?"

Enrique looked at me as if I had no brains. "A green card."

"No. A green card is very difficult to get."

"Then you will not work in any of those businesses you saw, unless you buy a forged one, and that is very expensive. It is dangerous, too, if you are discovered with one."

Silence filled the room.

Then Enrique continued. "You are not yet a man. You will not find it easy to get work in a city like this. Maybe on farms, yes." He was silent. Then added, "In the correct season. But no, work is hard to find here. You must know someone who can help you. And then the work will be very hard, because the Anglos and *pochos*, Mexican Americans, will not do it. You should return home, go back to school, and learn a skill."

"I will not go. I will find work."

"Your words have much pride," said señora Ortegon. "Do you have too much pride to return home now?" Her words pierced into me and found the truth. Hearing no answer from me, she said, "You talk like Gilberto, a foolish man of much pride. And what

does his pride do for him? He has nice clothes and a fine car, but there is poverty in his home.” She looked at her husband when she said it.

Enrique pretended not to hear her. He looked at me and said, “Would you stand on the street with others who have no papers and wait for the trucks to come by? The men in the trucks, the Anglos and sometimes pochos, point at this man and at that man and say, ‘I take you and you.’ They take only the strong workers and leave the young and old. And then, if they took you, could you do the work they ask? Work with shovel and pick all day in the heat? Eat and relieve yourself when they say? And then, take whatever money they pay you, even if it is only a little? Could you do all that without complaining? Because who can you complain to? Would you do that, Ernesto?”

“Yes, if I have to,” but I was not sure of myself. I only knew that I did not want to return to face my father and have him look at me with eyes of disappointment, with eyes that said, “You said you would send money, Ernesto, but you did not. You are a failure, Ernesto. You would have done better to stay here and work here.”

“He is stubborn, also — like Gilberto,” said Catalina. She leaned back in her chair and looked straight at me. “Raúl has told us about Teresa and her family. Your father has work. Teresa has work. Your mother earns money sewing, as I do. They have work that will pay for rebuilding your house. Mexicanos who come here have no work. Some are escaping danger. Your family is not desperate. You should return home, get an education.”

“You have not seen the looks of my father. He expects me to do more than I can in Tijuana.”

“Did he tell you he wanted you to do more?” Catalina leaned forward to look directly at me.

“His looks told me.”

Catalina stood and looked down at me. “You have the power to know what your father thinks by the way he looks at you?”

"I have known him all my life. I know what his looks mean." But did I really know?

"You need to go home," she said emphatically. "He is stubborn like Gilberto."

"I am not so stubborn," I said. "Maybe I could work until fall and then return." I made the concession so I would hear no more questions.

"Well, Raúl," said Enrique. "What shall we do with this young alambre?"

Raúl had been silent until then. "I will take him to stand in the street at Dos As tomorrow. And perhaps we can speak with Ortiz. Also, there is the seller of oranges."

"Yes," said Enrique. "We shall see how he works. And next Saturday, if you have no other work, you will collect paper and cardboard. You will meet Gilberto, because we work together."

Señora Ortegon made a bad face. "Gilberto, that man. Enrique, why must you continue to work with him?"

"Catalina, you know why. He is my friend, and we need the money. Do not speak about Gilberto any more tonight."

Catalina made another bad face and returned to the kitchen.

When Catalina left, Enrique said, "We have this argument every week. Catalina does not like Gilberto because he has a wife and children in México and a woman and even some children here. Also, he does not respect women. He thinks they should serve men and do only certain things. Catalina does not think that way. She is a strong and good woman. She is not submissive like the wives of so many I know. She has worked hard by my side. I tell you, Ernesto," and Enrique smiled at me. "I want Catalina by my side."

Later, in the room above the garage, as Raúl prepared to go out, he said, "Ernesto, you should return to Tijuana as Enrique said."

"I wish to remain and work and make some money."

“You will find it difficult. The Ortegons know how hard it is. They have been in los Estados Unidos a long time, maybe twelve years.”

“They are citizens, then?”

“No.” Raúl sat on his bed and looked at me as I sat on my bed on the floor. “They crossed the border long ago, when they were younger, and they had no work in México. To become a citizen they would have to return to México and petition to receive a green card. They need a blood relative living legally here to speak for them. They have none. Rosalia was carried here, but their sons were born here and are citizens. In every way the children are *pochos*. To take them to México to wait for a green card would be very difficult for them. Now, México is a distant and past home. This is their home.

“Now, they have good work. But when they first came here, they did not. For many years they worked in the fields, picking fruit and living in camps. The conditions were crude, worse sometimes than Misión Sol. And they moved from one camp to another to follow the work. Then, with the help of a friend, they found work in Los Angeles.”

Raúl was silent for a moment, while he finished dressing. “I did not have as hard a journey north as you did, Ernesto, but twice cars of the immigration police passed close by me, as I hid by the side of the road. Once, when I hid in a train yard, I saw them chase some immigrants who rode a train. Their car followed the train. When it slowed, the illegals jumped off. The car went where they were and stopped them. I stayed in the train yard until late at night and left in the dark.

“I worked first in a car wash, where señor Rodrigo sent me. At that place, I arrived early as did others. The *patrón* picked only those he wanted, who he knew to be good workers. The others went elsewhere to seek work. We were chosen as are women of la

cantina. That is the way it will be tomorrow when we go to stand by the street at Dos As, a store that sells building materials.

“After I worked one day at the car wash, the patrón could see that I worked hard, and he chose me every day. Rodrigo must have heard, because he found the work I have now which is better.”

“This Rodrigo,” I asked, “has he treated you fairly?” I thought of that ugly man with the spotted dogs.

“He found work for me twice. That is all I know. I had to pay him for a week of work. I think he also makes money from the patróns. As Enrique said, we immigrants will work hard for less money than Anglos. And we cannot complain. That is what the patróns want.

“I met Enrique where I work now. He told me of this room. I am fortunate.” He was silent and stared across the room. “Before, I shared a room smaller than this with five men, and it was dirty. Those men are good friends, but this is better.”

Raúl was silent again. Then, speaking slowly he said, “If you stay, Ernesto, it will not be easy — to find work and then to do it. But I will help you, and the Ortegons will also, because they are kind. I cannot go to Rodrigo. He knows you and what you and Oro did to his dogs. He could turn on all of us. But you must know you are a burden. We all are at risk at being caught by la migra, and the Ortegons have the most to lose. You must never do anything to risk discovery by la migra.” He had finished dressing and walked to the door.

I knew my stubbornness could cause the Ortegons and Raúl hardships, but I could not return to Tijuana. “I intend to work hard, and I will repay you and the Ortegons,” I said. Then, I asked, “Who is Ortiz?”

“He is a patrón where we work. He may have work for you, but ... also he may not. Tomorrow, though, we stand by the street at Dos As. We will be up before the sun. So you must be well rested and ready to work hard.”

After our talk, Raúl left the room to be with his friends. I lay on my bed on the floor, thinking about the way he looked at me as we talked. Was he right? Was Catalina right? Thoughts tumbled in my head as if struggling in a heavy surf, waves breaking over me. Did I misunderstand the looks of my father? No! I know my father. Would I not find work? I am a good worker and will find work. Will I burden the Ortegons and Raúl? No! I will take care of myself. Will I be a threat to their safety? I will always watch for la migra, and I will never involve them ... . But if I am here, how do I not involve them? My thoughts tumbled and swirled. My future seemed uncertain and daunting. Exhausted by mental wrestling, I slept.



## CHAPTER 22

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A GLOW in the eastern sky hinted at the coming day. With hands in pockets to brace against the cold of early morning, Raúl and I walked silently through neighborhoods and along a broad street of businesses to a corner where a large building stood. A sign on the wall over the doors in front read AA BUILDING SUPPLIES, or Dos As as it was called by the Latinos. The Anglos called it Two As. Beside the building a tall iron fence stretched along the boulevard. Behind it stood pallets of bricks, stone, and lumber. At that hour few cars passed the corner. Already, though, a few groups of Latino men, two or three together and some alone, stood along the side street.

“Today is Sunday. There will not be many construction company men looking for workers. But there will be local Anglos who need workers for many types of jobs in their yards or houses,” said Raúl.

“How do they choose the workers?” I asked.

“The builders and landscapers look first for workers they know, or ones who look experienced and strong to do the hard work. The local Anglos? I do not know. Perhaps they look for older workers, experienced workers. They look for workers they can trust to be at their homes. So, Ernesto, stand as tall as you can. Smile. Look trustworthy and as old as you can.”

“How do I look ... ?” I looked at Raúl, and he was smiling at me.

As daylight came, more men arrived and with them began an intermittent parade of pickup trucks, vans, and cars. Each one

drove slowly by the groups of men, the driver, and sometimes a passenger, peering from the windows. They stopped, pointed, and motioned to a man or sometimes two to come to their car or truck. Sometimes, if the men spoke no English, they were motioned away. But many who sought workers were Latinos, and they did not require English to be spoken. The process was remarkably quiet. No horns honked. No one yelled.

A man in a large old car motioned to Raúl. But when Raúl pointed to me, the man shook his head and chose another.

“You lost work because of me,” I said.

“No, Ernesto. I do not need this work now. I am only here to show you how.”

Hour by hour the time slowly passed. A man in a pickup truck motioned to Raúl, and Raúl pointed to me. Again, the man in the truck shook his head and chose another. As time passed, the cars and trucks came less often. For an hour, when the sun was high overhead, only two came by. With all hope of work gone, the remaining men began to drift away. But a few stayed, hoping for a late opportunity. Then a stake truck, with bags of oranges piled in the forward part of the truck bed, passed slowly down the street.

“He looks for desperate or hungry men,” said Raúl.

I looked at him questioningly, “Why do you say that?”

“He takes men to busy street corners to sell oranges and leaves them there. The men do not know where they are or when the truck will return. They are exposed to la migra and to local gangs. And, because they have no license to sell, the Anglo police can arrest them. Their earnings are small and depend on how many bags of oranges they sell. A man has to be desperate or hungry to climb into that truck. See, only one man goes, that young one over there.” He pointed to a man, who appeared to be only a boy, climbing into the truck. I could see myself climbing into that truck and began to feel desperate.

We stopped at a *taquería* where Raúl bought us food. “I

come here sometimes, as do my friends. The food is good and not expensive. We also have a grill for cooking behind the garage and some chairs. Juan often cooked for us, but now he is gone.” He looked thoughtfully away.

I wondered, if I do not get enough work, perhaps I could cook for a share of the food. I would talk to Raúl about it later.

On Monday, I rose early again and walked to Dos As. I stood by myself at the curb of the street. I tried to look tall and old. How does one look old? I did not know how. Jorge and Romeo came as the sun rose above the buildings to the east. Within an hour, a truck picked them up. They spoke to the driver as though they knew him. I had not gone to Dos As with them because I did not want to prevent them from finding work as I had with Raúl. Hour by hour the time passed. I waited, stood tall, and approached each truck and car that passed by. But I was not selected. I was waved away as a man brushes aside a fly.

Midday came and the remaining men began to leave. The truck of the man who sells oranges turned the corner and passed slowly by. I watched it stop to pick up the same young man who climbed into the truck the day before.

Two more hours I waited, but no one stopped for me. I walked slowly back to the room, feeling defeated. The others cooked at the grill behind the garage and gave me some of their food.

The next day was like the one before. And the one after, the same. On Thursday, again no one chose me. But this time, as the truck of the oranges seller drove slowly down the street, I approached it as did one other.

The driver, a large and burly man with bushy hair, asked, “Can you sell oranges?”

I nodded as did the other man. I had sold on the streets of Tijuana, and I knew I could sell oranges.

We were told to climb into the back of the truck with the bags of oranges. As the truck jerked ahead, I sat by the edge of the truck

bed and held onto a wooden rail to steady myself. The truck had wooden rail sides but no back gate. It bumped down many streets, turning in different directions. I did not know where I was taken, although I tried to remember the route. The sun was high and did not help me know the directions we went. The truck stopped at a busy street with a signal light. The driver ordered me out of the truck and put seven bags of oranges by the side of the road. "Sell for one dollar and fifty cents. You earn fifty cents for each bag you sell. You pay me one dollar for each bag. I will be watching you and return in two hours with more bags." He loaned me fifty cent pieces to use for change.

When he left, I looked around the street. There were not many cars passing by. A concrete median divided the street. The other man had been left across the street and down where the signal stopped cars coming from the other direction. He stood at the curb and raised a bag to show the passing cars. I did not think he would sell many bags that way. I knew from working in Tijuana that I could not sell much by standing at the side of the road. I needed to walk up to the cars. And that is what I did.

Most drivers ignored me and stared straight ahead. Some waved me away. A few expressed anger and yelled at me. Some boys in a car tried to grab a bag from me. They spoke in words I did not understand but seemed threatening. An older woman in an expensive car bought a bag. Two Latino men in a truck bought two. The driver paid twice the price and said in Spanish that I should keep all the extra money. I thanked him and wondered if he had sold oranges on the street. Before two hours had passed, I had sold all the oranges.

When the oranges seller returned, he was surprised when I paid him his money. He told me the cars would increase when workers left their jobs later in the afternoon. He left me many bags. I did not sell them all, but I was pleased to make some money,

much more than I could on the streets of Tijuana in an afternoon. I was alert and never saw a threat from police, gangs, or la migra.

The oranges seller returned me to Dos As after dark. The driver, pleased with how many bags I sold, said that he would take me to an even better place tomorrow. I nodded, but I wanted to work all day as Jorge and Romeo did. I stopped at the taquería, bought my own food, and ate. I was very hungry. And I bought some food to eat the next morning on the way to Dos As. Remaining in my pocket were the first dollars I had earned in los Estados Unidos.

I told Raúl, Jorge, and Romeo what I had done and showed them the money I had remaining. They all said I had done well, but Raúl later said, "You took much risk for such earnings. If you make only that much each day, you will not have enough to pay for the room and other needs. There will be no money remaining to send home to your father. You will need better work." Then, he smiled at me and said "You did well for your first day."

That night, they all accepted me in their room and let me have the bed where Juan had slept. I no longer slept on the floor.

The next day was much like the one before, but the oranges seller took me to a street with more traffic. I sold more oranges and made more money. I came back to the room very tired and went to bed early. Before I fell asleep, Raúl came to me as he was leaving to go out. "Tomorrow, you will go with me, Enrique, and Gilberto to collect cardboard and paper. You will learn what Enrique does and pay him back for his kindness to you."

I was too tired except to say "Yes."

The next day Raúl and I rose with the sun. Gilberto arrived soon after we finished eating. He was tall and thin with piercing black eyes and a bald head. He wore old, faded jeans and a black and white checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Even though thin in body, his shoulders, arms, and hands were strong, and his muscles showed many years of hard work. Enrique told him that I was un alambre who sought work in el Norte. His black eyes stared

like arrows into mine for a moment. He said, "Ernesto, when you look for work, do only the work of a man. That is my advice. There is no dignity in being an alambre, except in the work you do and the money you make. Take only the work of a man and not of a woman. You will suffer too many other indignities here."

When Gilberto spoke, I saw Enrique shake his head slightly and smile a little. I remembered Catalina saying, "That Gilberto, he has such pride." But maybe there was little else for him to have. At that time, I could see it in Gilberto but not in myself. Pride was my companion, also. It kept me from returning home when maybe I should have done so. Pride is such a false companion.

As we walked from the house to the old brown pickup truck, Enrique said to me, and to Gilberto, who walked beside him, "Gilberto has been my friend since we worked together at a meat packing plant many years ago. The work was hard, lifting the heavy meat in the cold refrigerator, and the smell was terrible. I will never forget it. When men work together side by side in such conditions, they become friends forever."

Enrique and Gilberto climbed into the cab of the truck. I followed Raúl into the back where we rode on cardboard and paper that had already been collected. The truck was old, with many dents and scratches giving us a ride full of bumps and jerks. But the discomfort did not matter to me, because I was working with Raúl.

Enrique drove down alleys and behind businesses where he knew that cardboard and paper had been placed. As he drove, I held the side of the truck and studied the passing scene.

Raúl shouted over the traffic noise, "Enrique has arranged for some of the businesses to leave boxes and other paper for him."

We began near the home of the Ortegons, in alleys behind small businesses: a furniture store, a store that sold refrigerators and stoves, a paint store.

When we stopped at just one store, only Raúl and I got out

of the truck and gathered the cardboard. Usually, there were many stores along an alley, and we all worked. When we stopped, I jumped from the back of the truck and ran to break down the boxes, make them flat, and pick up the paper. I worked fast to show Enrique that I was a hard worker.

In the morning, we drove around the streets and alleys where businesses lined the boulevards. After living in the area for a week, I recognized some of the streets and places we stopped and passed by. I saw many Latinos, which I pointed out to Raúl

“Most are *pochos*,” he yelled over the traffic and creaking truck noise. “Many do not like illegals. Some think we take work from them.” We hit a big bump, throwing us into the air. We laughed.

On many of the walls and buildings that we passed I saw graffiti, *placa*. “What is the *placa*?” I shouted.

“The names of *barrio* gangs,” Raúl yelled back. We held the sides of the truck as we turned a corner. “They mark their territory as a dog waters his, but they do it with paint. And the gangs fight each other with fists and guns and knives for territory. Many are killed and wounded, and for what? They also fight the black gangs, like one tribe against another.” We entered an alley where the traffic noise diminished. Raúl spoke more quietly. “But we also have gangs in Tijuana.” He hesitated. “When *Méxicanos* first came back to this country that once was theirs, gangs protected the people in each neighborhood. Then, they had a high purpose, but now they are drug dealers and criminals. But for some of the very poor boys, gangs provide a family they do not have. So they become a member of a family of criminals.”

*Placa* covered the walls of the buildings along the alley. Pride, I thought. That is also why they do it. But I said nothing.

After we picked up the cardboard and returned to the truck, Raúl pointed to the *placa*. “Those *pocho* gang members are brave fighters, Ernesto. They are not cowards. They do not like illegals in their territory. If you see any of them, run the other way. If they

catch you in their territory, they will beat and rob you or do worse to you.”

The load in the truck bed had grown to require Enrique and Gilberto to tie it down after each stop. Raúl and I squeezed into the cab with them.

We drove many places in the city that does not end. By midday, I did not know where we were, even though I tried to remember the path. It was no game I played, but a serious practice to remember where I was being taken. If I continued to sell oranges, I wanted to know where I was if danger came and I had to return to my room on foot.

When the truck became very full, we tied the cardboard to it in a large pile. Twice during the morning, Enrique drove to a recycling center where the cardboard and paper were weighed, and he was paid for it.

As we drove farther from our room, I saw fewer Latinos and more Anglos. I began to feel uncomfortable. We passed by endless shops and even a large shopping mall with many fine stores. When we stopped there I felt exposed and out of place. I saw no one like myself, only wealthy Anglos and some Asians. Later, we stopped in an alley behind a building near where the alley met the street. An old Anglo walked along the street and started to cross the alley. His hair was white, and he wore a red plaid shirt that was too big for his thin body. He stopped in the alley entrance and looked at us as we did our work. His eyes met mine, and they showed contempt. He smoked a cigarette and threw it down hard. He continued to stare at me. I thought his look said, “Why are you here? Go back to the place you came from.” I will never forget that look, because I saw it often as the days passed. When we climbed into the back of the truck, I told Raúl of the look and that I felt uncomfortable.

“I did not see it.” He spoke loudly as the truck started to move. “I, too, felt uncomfortable when I first came here, but now I am not so concerned. He probably gives that look to all who have



brown skin." A horn honked ahead of us and the truck stopped suddenly. Raúl continued when the truck started to move again. "How can anyone distinguish an illegal from a Mexican-American or other Latino citizen of this country? I do not think an Anglo can do it."

He was quiet for a while and then yelled above the traffic noise, "Maybe it is good to notice such Anglo looks. That way we will always be cautious. If we are cautious, we will be safer from the immigration police." He smiled. "La migra knows they cannot stop everyone who is Latino. There are too many *Chicanos* who would protest. So we must do nothing to bring attention to ourselves. After a time, Ernesto, you will not see that look in every face, because it is not always there."

Raúl lay back on the pile of cardboard in the truck as we rode to the next stop. "But," he shouted, "if we get sick and have to go to a hospital, or if we get drunk and crash a car, or if we go to la cantina where others without papers go, then we will see la migra. It is important to be cautious, if we wish to remain here."

We filled the truck two more times that day. In our travels around the city, only once, at the top of a hill, did I see the tall buildings of downtown Los Angeles to the west. When we returned home in the late afternoon, Enrique paid a share of the earnings to Gilberto and offered Raúl and me a share, but we refused. I told him that I was returning his kindness. He looked at me and nodded.

"Next week, Gilberto?" said Enrique as Gilberto went to his car.

"Yes, Enrique, next week."

Enrique turned to Catalina, who had come to the door. "This young Ernesto," and he put his hand on my shoulder, "works very hard."

I smiled at Enrique and at Catalina. "You have done much for me."

Catalina put her hands on her hips and looked at me without smiling. "I am glad to hear it," she said. But I knew she still wanted me to return to Tijuana. While Raúl and I went to the stairs leading to our room, Enrique whispered in her ear. She called to us. "After you wash, come and eat with us."

While eating, Catalina said to me, "Ernesto, tomorrow is Sunday. You should go to early Mass with us." I think she felt responsible for my well-being as a mother would her child.

On Sunday, I did not work for the oranges seller but went to Mass with the Ortegons. After Mass, we went to a large park near their home, where we met friends of theirs. I played fútbol on the grass with Ramón and Luís and other children. Even Rosalia played. We listened to Latino music played from a radio in one of the cars parked nearby.

I talked with Rosalia as often as I could, while Catalina watched me closely. We talked of our schools. I described my school on the hill, where I could see el Norte. I told only briefly of Oro, how I met Raúl, and our walks at la playa. She told me about her school and that she liked to dance. When I told her I would like to see her perform, she looked at the ground and smiled broadly. I liked her smile, her laugh, the sound of her voice.

Later, when I sat on a bench, Enrique must have seen me watching Rosalia run and laugh with some other girls. He came and sat by me and said, "My father said, 'We Méxicanos know how to multiply. That way we always have family and friends.' Rosalia already has enough friends and family. We do not permit her to talk much with the men who live where you do. Catalina watches her closely. We want her to have an education." He was silent for a moment, then said, "I also watch her closely and her friends." He did not smile, but looked me straight in the eye.

## CHAPTER 23

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ON MONDAY, Jorge and Romeo were chosen for work, as we stood at Dos As, but I was not. The men in every truck and car I approached waved me away. Again, I went with the oranges seller, who took me to yet a different location. I sold about as many bags of oranges as I had on Friday. Tuesday was the same. Again, the oranges seller took me to a new place. I think he tried to keep me from knowing where I was. Or maybe to sell at different locations protected me from la migra and the police. He must have had many places to drop off those of us who sold oranges for him.

Wednesday, the oranges seller took me to a street divided by a concrete median. Another man sold at the signal across the street to cars coming in the opposite direction. I had been there about two hours, when a police car drove by the other side and stopped by the man who sold oranges. I did not wait to see what happened, but picked up the remaining three bags of oranges and ran from there. I hid behind a building where a car could not follow and waited.

After many minutes, I returned to a place where I could see the corner where I had sold oranges and waited for the oranges seller. When he arrived, I told him what had happened. He swore an oath and told me to get into the truck. I told him I did not want to sell oranges anymore and asked him to take me back to Dos As. He refused. "It is too far to go so early," he said. Against my protests, he took me to another location and ordered me out of his truck. Reluctantly, I sold more oranges that day, but I did not try hard. I vowed never again to go with him to sell oranges.

The following two days, I stood at Dos As, but I was not chosen for any work. On Saturday, I helped Enrique collect cardboard, but as before, I took no money. On Sunday, after Mass, I wandered aimlessly around the streets, wondering what I should do.

Monday, I returned to Dos As, but again I was not selected by those who drove by, and I refused to go with the oranges seller. But on Tuesday, I returned to his truck. With a smirk, he stared at me for a long time, then told me to climb into the back of the truck. We were reluctant partners. He knew I did not want to go with him, but I could sell his oranges. I had no other work choice, and he knew it.

He took me to the place where I first sold oranges, but no one sold on the other side across the median strip. I had sold eleven bags of oranges by late afternoon, when a car of young *pochos* drove by on the other side of the boulevard. Their car slowed and they stared at me. At the far corner, the tires of their car screeched, and it turned back in my direction.

I ran with the bag of oranges I carried, but left two where they lay on the curb. I found an alley between buildings and ran down to an intersecting alley, turned down that alley, found a small street, and returned to the boulevard. I walked quickly down the boulevard and entered a nearby clothing store. Soon a short, thin, well-dressed salesman came to me and asked, in Spanish, what I wanted. I told him the truth, that a gang chased me. He looked at the bag of oranges I carried and for a moment did or said nothing. Then, he took me to the back of the store and told me to wait there. But I wondered if he would call *la migra*. After a time that seemed very long, he returned and said that I could safely leave. I thanked him and offered him the bag of oranges, but he refused. I returned to the alley I had first run down and stood in the shadow of a building. I looked up and down the street for the *pocho* gang. They were gone. But at the corner, the two bags of oranges I left on the curb also were gone.

I waited a long time for the oranges seller. When he returned and heard what had happened, he said I must pay for all the oranges he left with me or return them, and then he drove me to Dos As. He accepted little risk for his venture. Only the sellers were at risk. After stopping at the taquería, I reached my room with little money remaining for the long day of work.

The next day, I did not go to Dos As, but only wandered the streets, trying to think of a better way to earn money. No solution occurred to me.

Thursday, I did not even get up with the others but stayed in bed late. I was very discouraged. I dressed slowly and prepared to leave the room when Jorge and Romeo returned, out of breath and speaking quietly with much agitation. La migra had raided the corner at Dos As. Jorge had seen the cars of the immigration officers and the two had escaped by running a route they had planned long before. But they were certain that many had been caught. We went to a local market, bought some food and ate it in a park nearby. They continued to talk of the raid, but mostly they talked about what to do next. Finally, after much discussion, they decided to return to Dos As the next day. Surely, la migra would not return so soon. They had escaped once. They could do it again, if they had to.

On Friday, we all returned to Dos As. Few workers were there. Again, Jorge and Romeo were chosen by a man with a large truck. As they went to the back of the truck to climb in, they waved at me to follow them. I was filled with a mixture of joy and apprehension as I ran to the truck and climbed in beside them. It was a strange change in fortune, but la migra had made possible better work for me.

We were driven many kilometers to a large building which was under construction. Men worked inside it, finishing the fine carpentry and painting. Outside, on the grounds, men stood around a backhoe and a small tractor. Plastic pipe lay stacked nearby. A

truck drove up with a load of large smooth rocks. I jumped from the truck that brought me, eager to work and to show the patrón that I could work as hard as any of the others.

All day, we worked at many different tasks. Around the building, we dug small ditches that ran from larger ditches dug by the backhoe. We carried pipe to the ditches for the irrigation system. The pipes were placed in the ditches and joined together by experienced workers. Afterward, we shoveled dirt back into the ditches and leveled the ground. We moved the large, heavy rocks in wheelbarrows and placed them where the patrón showed us. Always, I worked as fast as I could. At midday, we were given a break. I bought some food from a food truck that stopped by the workplace and sat in the shade of the building with Jorge and Romeo.

“Well, Ernesto,” said Romeo, “how do you like this work?”

“It is better than selling oranges.”

“Harder, ... safer maybe, ... and more money.” He smiled.

After I ate, I leaned my head against the wall of the building and closed my eyes. I was tired but glad for the work.

All that afternoon, we continued the work. When the day ended, the patrón spoke to me. “You work hard. Next week we plant, and I will give you more work.”

I was very pleased to hear him say that, because he paid me more than I earned in three days selling oranges and much more than I ever earned in Tijuana for one day of work. But I was so tired I could barely climb into the truck for the ride back to Dos As. I leaned against the side of the truck, and, despite the bumps, I fell asleep. On the way to the room over the garage, I bought food at the taquería to take with me. Romeo and Jorge went directly to the room. Tonight was Friday, and they were going out “to find some girls,” said Romeo with a smile. He persisted in his quest.

I cleaned up, ate sitting in a chair behind the garage, returned to my bed, too tired to go anywhere.

On Saturday, the routine of collecting cardboard and paper continued. And on Sunday, I went to early Mass and later walked the streets to explore the neighborhood.

Rain came on Monday. Jorge, Romeo, and I did not go to Dos As, because there would be no work. For most of the day, we stayed in the room. Romeo strummed his guitar and attempted to sing. The sound was so awful, I fled, preferring to walk in the rain. If he wanted to attract girls, he should never touch a guitar or try to sing, but he did not know how bad the sound was. Later, we watched television on a small set in the room, but there was nothing to see, except in the afternoon when we watched some fútbol.

Tuesday, the rain continued until late morning, when I walked to Dos As. Only a few patróns looked for workers that late on a rainy day. Reluctantly, I went with the oranges seller. Our uneasy partnership continued. I did not want to go with him, but I needed to make money. I did not know if I could expect to work for the landscape patrón again. For two more days I sold oranges. I was always alert but met with no problems.

Then on Friday, the landscape patrón returned, and he selected me. The earth had dried enough to begin planting, and we three had work again. We dug holes and planted that day and returned Saturday to continue the work.

So, that was my life during the next three weeks — work for the landscape patrón, and when he did not come by Dos As, work for the oranges seller. I liked to work for the landscape patrón, even though the work was hard and I returned to the room tired each night. But the work was unpredictable. Some days the patrón came, others he did not. He had a crew of men who worked every day for him, and he only came to Dos As when he needed more workers. We worked at many different tasks. Sometimes at new construction sites and sometimes on the grounds of large estates and businesses. I liked being outside and did not mind the hard work of planting, digging, mowing lawns, weeding. I learned a

little about landscaping, of plants and trees, their placement and care. But the work was not steady, and I often found myself on street corners selling oranges.

One night during that time, Raúl asked me how much money I had saved. I showed him, laying it on my bed. He put it in three piles: one for the room to be paid to the Ortegons, another to pay for food and other personal needs, and the third to send to my father after I had paid for all expenses. Then, he pointed to the pile to be used for food and other needs and said, "Some of this money you must use to buy clothes. The clothes Catalina gave to you are not sufficient. And you need shoes. I will show you a store where you can buy used clothes for only a little money."

The used clothing store was a long walk, maybe three kilometers from our room. It faced a busy boulevard with a hardware store beside it. Inside, many rows of all kinds of clothing filled a very large room. Raúl showed me where to find shirts and pants in sizes that might fit me. I found two shirts for work that I liked, one brown and the other blue. They had long sleeves and buttoned up the front. Also, I chose for fun a tee-shirt with a picture of a surfer on it. I bought a pair of blue jeans that I could wear to work and a pair of brown pants to wear to Mass. And I bought a pair of shoes and some socks for work. Raúl chose only one shirt that had a brown and black pattern.

Upon leaving the store, I had almost no money left to send to my father. Raúl had been showing me where to get things I needed for as little money as possible. Yet I had little money left after I bought food, toothpaste, soap, and other personal items from the market he showed me; had my clothes cleaned by old señora Ramirez who lived three blocks away; and my hair cut by Armondo, our neighbor, who cut hair on his back porch.

I returned to my room with those feelings of insufficient money only to find a letter from my mother waiting for me. She thanked me for my letter and thanked the Ortegons and Raúl for



helping me. She expressed loneliness at my absence and asked me to return home. She said that my father also asked for my return so that I could attend school. Many of my friends, and even señora García, said I should return. When I read the letter to the Ortegons, Catalina nodded her head but said nothing. It was a hard letter to receive and read to them, because they also wanted me to return. But I did not want to go. I had just begun to earn enough money to live in los Estados Unidos. But with the purchase of my new clothes, I was in a state of poverty. I wanted to send money home to my father. I did not want to go home before I had sent some money to him. I did not want to look at his face and see disappointment or maybe even scorn.

The last week of May, I worked every day for the landscape patrón. That was enough to give me extra money. When May ended, and after I paid the Ortegons for the room, I sent forty dollars to my father. I felt very proud that I had saved that money after spending so much on my personal needs. I now knew the hard work needed to earn good money and the difficulty to save any of it after paying for the necessities simply to live. I knew a little more why Gilberto spoke as he did about work.

As the days passed, the workers who came to Dos As changed. Some returned to México; some found other work. Even Jorge and Romeo found other work through recommendations of a friend who worked in a large plastics factory. They went to work one bus ride away to the east side of downtown Los Angeles where they packed plastic parts into boxes for shipping. With them and others gone from Dos As, my work for the landscape *Patrón* increased.

During the second week in June, Juan, who was the cook and had my bed before me, told us of a dishwashing job that would be available and regular work. But when I went to apply for it, another had already been chosen. I was very disappointed. I wanted steady work like Raúl had that would help me earn more money to send

to my father. Instead, I worked hard for the landscape patrón so that he would continue to select me.

When there was no work on Saturday, I collected cardboard with Enrique, Raúl, and Gilberto. One Saturday, Raúl and Gilberto worked at the factory, and I rode alone with Enrique. The money he paid me I set aside for a later surprise for the Ortegons.

In late June, only two weeks after Jorge had taken the work in the plastics factory, he quit and returned to stand again at Dos As. "I am *un agricultor, un vaquero*. I need to work outside, not imprisoned in a windowless barn," he said. He had worked on a rancho in México and could not work inside a building. So we two worked for the landscape patrón.

During those many weeks, at times when I was alone, I thought of Rosalia. As the days lengthened, I sometimes reached my room before the sun set, and I spoke with her. Occasionally, we sat together on the porch of her house, while Enrique and Catalina sat nearby and her brothers, Ramón and Luís, played in the yard. Slowly, she became my special friend. I thought she was very pretty, but I know I said that before. Her laughter made me smile whenever I heard it. I knew she cared for me, because she decided that I must learn about los Estados Unidos and to speak English. She told me English words and their meaning and then spoke them so fast I could not understand them. She started with words I already knew. *Casa* was house. *Mesa* was table. *Baño* was bathroom. *Gracias* was thank you. And there were many more. She taught me the alphabet and numbers, dates, and phrases that are said often. Slowly, I began to recognize some words and phrases when I heard English spoken around me or on the radio or television.

She said learning English was difficult for her at first but became easier as she grew older. "Verbs are hard to learn. And adjectives come in front of the nouns, not behind as in Spanish. Spelling can be difficult. In Spanish the vowels always have the same sounds, but in English they can have different sounds. And

some letters have no sounds.” She stopped to think of examples. “The Spanish word *masa* is spelled dough in English. But it is pronounced do, where o is like we say it in Spanish. So many extra letters that make no sound. For what? *Barca* in English is spelled boat but pronounced b-o-t. The a is not spoken. Some English words end in e, but the letter is not pronounced. It is used to tell how the vowel two letters before it is pronounced.”

“It sounds difficult.”

“It is. The English verbs do not change as much as Spanish when referring to a person, you know, like I, you, they. But they change when speaking about the present, past, or future. And there are rules, but they are not always followed. They have a rule, ‘i before e, except after c.’ But the word for *vecino* is spelled n-e-i-g-h-b-o-r. The e is before i, but there is no c. And the gh has no sound.”

“It all sounds very complicated. Of course, Spanish has rules that are not always followed, too.”

“That is true.”

“How do you learn it and the spelling of the words?”

“I speak it every day, and every day it gets easier. I memorize the spelling, and the more I use the words, the better I remember the spelling. Do you not do the same in Spanish?”

“I suppose. I had not thought about it. What other classes do you have?”

“Mathematics. I like mathematics, but many girls do not. History and physical education. In physical education we play games and dance.” She smiled when she said “dance.” “Depending on the day, we have science, art, music. I am also learning to type. And we have language. I take Spanish.”

“Spanish? Why do you take Spanish? You already speak it.”

“We all take English here, even the Anglos. Do you take Spanish in your school?”

“Yes.”

“I take it for the same reason — to learn proper grammar, to

speak and write it correctly. Now, it is very easy, but I am told it will be harder in high school. When I started, the first sentence in the Spanish book was ‘Un burro es un animal.’”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

We laughed.

At the end of June, I received another letter from my mother thanking me for the money I had sent, but imploring me to return. She was concerned for my safety, and she said that I was needed at home, but did not say why. I thought she said it only to convince me to return. I did not want to go. Instead, I sent seventy-five dollars to my father.

In early July, Enrique came to me one Friday evening and said that Ortíz had work at the factory. He would talk to me on Monday. I felt like celebrating. Regular work would be much better than standing in the street at Dos As, not knowing if I would have work, and when there was none there, selling oranges on a strange street corner, exposed to much risk.

The next evening, Raúl and I took the whole Ortegon family to dinner at a restaurant. I used the money I had set aside after collecting cardboard with Enrique. Raúl paid an equal share. At first, Catalina said the family should not go. It was too expensive. It was too risky. But Raúl knew of a good restaurant where the cost was not high, and there was little risk, because both Anglos and Latinos went there. The immigration police would not look there. At dinner, Catalina smiled and was pleased. Enrique patted my back and said to me quietly, “Muchas gracias.” I knew Raúl and I did a good thing that night. The best part — I sat beside Rosalia.

## CHAPTER 24

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SINCE I ARRIVED in El Norte I had wanted steady work. Now I would see Ortiz about a job in the factory where Enrique and Raúl worked. I only knew the name, Ortiz. I did not know what the work was, or what Ortiz was like, or what I should do to impress him. I was apprehensive, but I knew that Enrique would help me.

I rode in the back of the truck with Raúl, until Enrique left Catalina at a bus stop. She worked in the center of the city where she sewed clothing. Raúl and I climbed into the cab, and Enrique drove to an area where there were many factories. He stopped in a parking lot beside a high wire fence surrounding a very large, old wooden building with fading and peeling gray paint.

When I jumped down from the truck, I felt nervous, not knowing what to expect. But could it be worse than selling oranges on street corners? Others joined us as we walked through the gate to the building. Many of the workers were Latinos. I did not know if they were citizens or undocumented. But there were also Anglo workers and even two Asians. We went in the back door by the loading dock. There, in a small office which held only a desk, I met Ortiz. He was tall with gray hair and a mustache. He wore a plaid shirt and dark pants. I could see that he was important, because many keys hung on a chain from his belt.

“You are not as big as I expected,” he said, as his eyes looked straight down at mine from a deeply lined face, a map showing many years of hard work.

“But I am a hard worker. You will see,” I said. I saw Enrique smile a little, as he stood beside me.

But Ortíz did not smile. He said only, "We shall see."

He then showed me the work I would do. "You will clean," he said. "We no longer have anyone to come at night to clean. So you will clean the washrooms, and you will clean and sweep places where the workers tell you. When there is need, you will help move the wooden parts on their carts and help at the loading dock. But you will not disturb the workers when you do these things."

He took me to the washrooms — a large one for men and a small one for women. "In the morning, start here in this one for men. Then, do the one for women. That one will not take long. It is always neat and clean. Then, clean the one for men again after the noon break and clean both again before you leave. Wash the sinks and toilets and mop the floors each time you clean. Wash walls as needed, maybe once every two weeks. After you clean the rooms, come on the work floor and sweep, clean, and help where there is need." He then showed me the closet containing cleaning tools and supplies. "Tell me when you need more supplies."

After that, he showed me the factory where furniture was made. Material entered the building from the loading dock, moved through the building in a large U shape and left as completed furniture from the loading dock. Wood, bundles of fabric, and other material coming into the building were sorted and stored. From there, the wood was moved to large machines, placed along the floor. They cut it into frames for sofas and chairs, and parts for cabinets and table tops. Workers placed roughed-out wood pieces in other machines to automatically cut shapes of legs, arms, spindles, shelves, and doors, for chairs, tables, sofas, and cabinets. These pieces were placed on carts which were moved to an area beyond the machines where they were sanded and assembled. In another walled-off area were paint booths, a room for finishing parts with stain, oil, and varnish and for drying them. Behind another wall dividing the building, furniture was upholstered, stored, packed, and prepared for shipping.

Storage rooms lined the side of the building where the wood-cutting machines were. A stairway rose above the storage rooms to a landing and a row of six offices where the managers and secretaries worked at their desks.

That first morning, I tried to clean the washroom for men fast to show that I was a hard worker and to avoid the unpleasantness and smell of that place. Someone had thrown up in and around a toilet, a sickness caused by too much weekend drinking, perhaps. I would discover that the men took little care to be neat in their washroom. As Ortiz said, the room for women was always neat, but few women worked in the factory. When Ortiz looked at what I had done, he made me do it again. I was ashamed and embarrassed to have Enrique, Raúl, and Gilberto know that I failed. But failure brings important lessons. Ortiz taught me that I should do each task correctly, even if it is unpleasant. Then I would not have to repeat it. That lesson has stayed with me all my life. To do all the work that day and to show that I was serious, I went without eating. After that day, I did my work more carefully, and I never again missed a midday meal.

As day followed day, I became acquainted with the factory and many of the workers. The hardest physical labor took place on the loading dock where Raúl and Gilberto worked. After I saw them lifting and carrying wood, material, and furniture all day, I knew why Gilberto had such muscles in his shoulders and arms. Forklift trucks carried heavy loads, which gave the men a rest, but I thought Raúl and Gilberto must be very tired at the end of each day. They must feel as I did when I worked for the landscape patrón. Then, almost every night I was too tired to do anything except eat and sleep. My work in the factory was easier than the work I did for the landscape patrón, even when I worked some of the time on the loading dock.

When Gilberto first saw me with the broom, he frowned,

looked at me with his piercing eyes, shook his head and said, "You do the work of a woman, Ernesto. You have no dignity in that work."

"I did not choose it," I said. "But it is steady work, Gilberto, and I need such work. I have no complaints for now. I am not ashamed of this work."

Gilberto continued to frown, shaking his head as he returned to his work.

The best part of my work was to go out on the work floor to sweep, clean up, load and push the carts, and help the workers at their machines. There, I learned how furniture was made.

"This is but a small factory," Enrique said to me as I swept near a machine he operated.

I looked around at the building that appeared very large.

Enrique continued, "The managers must look constantly for new work and to do special projects— sofas, chairs, or cabinets. Sometimes there is much work here. Sometimes there is little. Occasionally, Ortíz had said to me, 'Stay home tomorrow, Enrique.' That is why I learned to operate this machine and others. That way I can do many different kinds of work, and I do not stay at home as much as others do."

So I, too, watched how the machines operated and helped the workers when they needed it. The wood-cutting machines were operated by both Anglos and Latinos, like Enrique. Although some of the machine operators ignored me, others, even Anglos, spoke with me. One Anglo, Tony, always greeted me in Spanish with a smile from a tan round face with a head of short gray hair. He was older than most of the workers and, despite a large belly, could operate all the machines. He was the most respected of all the wood-cutting workers. Alex, a lean man in his mid-thirties, born in México but had a green card, and a friend of Raúl, showed me how the band saws and routers, using patterns, automatically cut wooden parts.

The parts were placed carefully on carts and moved to the



assembly area. Most of the parts came from the machines with smooth surfaces, but after inspection some required sanding. Sanding, gluing, clamping, and applying veneers took place on benches in an assembly area outside the finishing room. Three Anglos worked there, two highly skilled men and an assistant. The two experienced men assembled the furniture. The assistant did most of the sanding. They did not permit me to clean in their area. The assistant did the cleaning. They were not friendly to me or to any of the Latinos.

The two Asian men finished the wooden parts, working swiftly and with great skill. They took the wood, and with their stains and varnishes, coaxed out the beauty hidden in the bare wood.

Only *Méxicanos* worked in the upholstery room. I did not go there very often, because another helper, Manuelito, worked there with three men and a woman who sewed on a machine. He held and moved furniture, carried fabric from storage, helped to lay out fabric for the cutter, and helped to staple fabric of upholstered pieces to frames.

Another helper in the factory, an Anglo named Derek, worked in the shipping department. He helped prepare the furniture for shipping, but I never really knew what he did.

The six offices located above the storage rooms all had windows that looked out at the factory floor. The windows had blinds that were sometimes open, sometimes closed. I could see the offices from below. Sometimes, managers stood on the landing and leaned against the railing to look down at the workers on the floor below.

The factory manager, a short, gray-haired man, worked in the sixth, largest, and farthest office from the stairway. He seemed to be always agitated. He often talked on the telephone, frequently pacing in his office. When he met with the other managers, he sometimes stood and waved his arms. Shouting occasionally came from his office when the blinds were closed.

Two middle-aged women secretaries worked in the next, or fifth, office. They appeared always busy typing, answering phones, and working for all the men, whose offices they rushed to and from.

The operations manager, tall and thin with black hair combed straight back, worked in the fourth office. He often stood on the landing watching the workers on the floor and walked among them with Ortíz, assigning and checking the work.

A man with eyeglasses, who calculated numbers with a machine and kept the financial records, worked in the third office from the stairs.

A tall, thin, gray-haired man worked at both a desk and a drawing board in the second office. He designed some of the furniture. I would have liked to watch what he did, but I was not permitted to go to the offices. One of the secretaries cleaned them. Salesmen and buyers used the first office. It always seemed a whirlwind of activity, with men coming and going, using the four desks to make telephone calls, look at large books, and talk to each other and the factory manager.

Those who occupied the offices above the work floor seemed to be of a different class than the rest of us. Their work was different. They dressed differently, in finer clothes; some of the men wore coats and ties. The women wore dresses and stylish shoes. Were their offices up high on purpose? They were like royalty looking down on the workers.

Sometimes, all three of us helpers worked together on the loading dock. Derek and Manuelito were a contrast. Manuelito was short, broad, and had dark skin. Derek was tall, thin, with very white hair and skin. But there were similarities between them. Both never seemed serious. Their faces always bore smiles, and they often joked with other workers, Manuelito in Spanish and Derek in English. Derek showed his friendliness by greeting me when I first went to work in the plant, but our languages kept us apart.

Manuelito joked much, but his jokes were only in his mouth and not in his heart. He and Raúl had lived together when Raúl first came to Los Angeles. Manuelito still lived with five others in a small and crowded apartment.

“Manuelito worked in a restaurant when we first shared a room,” said Raúl one day as we sat on the loading dock eating our meal.

“Yes, it is true,” said Manuelito, who was no taller than I, yet he was twenty years old. That is why he was called little Manuel. “I washed dishes. It was good work, better than this, although the pay was no more.”

“Why did you leave, then?” I asked.

“He had no choice,” said Raúl. “The restaurant closed.”

I looked at Manuelito. “Why was it better work?”

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “The waitresses — oh, they were so beautiful.” He shook his head and smiled broadly. “Now, I work in a furniture factory and see only one older woman.” He laughed again. “I think, though, that I will return to México soon. I grow tired of the pochas here in el Norte and this factory.”

“Manuelito, you are a fortunate man,” said Raúl. “You have no cares. Perhaps you also do not have as many opportunities with women as you say. You talk like Romeo, our friend. Do you also have a guitar to attract the women?”

“No. I do not need one,” and he laughed.

The days were all much the same — clean the washrooms, sweep, collect refuse and dispose of it. Then I worked as needed to load, push and unload carts, help workers lift and move furniture and furniture pieces and help at the loading dock, unloading material and loading furniture.

As July passed slowly to an end, I spent many warm evenings sitting on the porch of the Ortegons talking with Rosalia. She did not go to school in the summer. And her parents did not send me

away. I think they trusted me, and perhaps did not consider me to be like the other men in the room above the garage and their friends. During that time, Rosalia continued teaching me English and telling me things she learned in her school. She smiled when I mispronounced English words, but did not mock me. I thought of her often.

Sometimes, Enrique put a small television set on the porch and connected its cord to a plug in the house through an open window. The family normally watched Anglo programs and often invited me to sit with them. Even though Rosalia told me some of the words, the talk was so fast that I could tell little of what was said at first. But after some time, I could recognize some words and phrases.

After three weeks in the factory, the month ended, and we were paid. The Anglo helper, Derek, left the factory. Ortiz said that he sought work that paid more money. Derek said he had no hope of improvement in a factory employing so many "illegal aliens." He was more serious than I first thought. He was not replaced at the factory, and my work and that of Manuelito increased.

The money I received was more than I had ever seen before at one time. After paying the Ortegons for the room and saving for food and other expenses, I sent one hundred and twenty dollars to my father.

I was beginning to feel at ease in los Estados Unidos. I had steady work that paid enough for me to send money to my father. I had Raúl and other friends. And there was Rosalia.

## CHAPTER 25

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ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON in early August, Enrique permitted me to go with Rosalia to a movie. She combed her hair back in a braid, and I thought she was even more beautiful than before. She chose an Anglo movie where only English was spoken. We sat in the back where she whispered to me in Spanish what was said. It was a comedy, but many times I did not know why people laughed, until Rosalia whispered to me. Then, I laughed alone.

The theater was in a shopping center where a small photo booth stood outside one of the stores. We both took our pictures. Rosalia smiled in one and stuck her tongue out in another. I tried to look serious but only laughed. We put our heads together and smiled for two pictures. Rosalia took the pictures of me, and I took the photos of her. I pinned her pictures on the wall above my bed. Each night I looked at them and smiled to myself to see her pretty smile and her silly face with her tongue stuck out. And I remembered how I liked the feel of her head against mine.

A week later on Sunday afternoon, the Ortegons and I went to the park again after Mass. I sat with Rosalia on the grass in the shade of a large oak tree and spoke to her of Oro as I had never spoken to anyone before. I told her how I found him after the attack by the spotted dogs and how Raúl and I cared for him. I spoke of the runs along the beach, the conquest of the spotted dogs, his protection of me along Calle Malinche, and of his heroism during the fire of Pancho Villa.

I spoke of the qualities of Oro. He had dignity, alertness, faithfulness, courage, joy, gentleness, and innocence. I told her I

could see those qualities by simply watching what he did, looking into his eyes, seeing his tail wag, and having his nose push at me. I told her I missed him very much.

As we talked quietly together about Oro, I began to realize that, even though he was gone, his qualities would always be with me. I could see them all around me, and I could embrace them for my own.

Oro showed dignity in the way he stood and held his head high even when he had only three good legs. I have tried to stand up to the indignities of cleaning the washroom. I have seen the dignity of other men and women in their work. I saw it in Catalina waiting for a bus, head held high. Dignity is everywhere. It can even be seen in trees and mountains.

Oro showed alertness when the spotted dogs attacked him a second time. I have been alert on the street corners when selling oranges. I see it in the eyes of other immigrants. I have seen it on the faces of young boys playing fútbol. It is in the entire bodies of the workers at the factory, car washes, yards and grounds where the gardeners work.

Oro was faithful to me when I was sick and to all his friends in Pancho Villa until the end. But are not real friends always faithful to each other? Were not Raúl and the Ortegons faithful to me?

And what great courage Oro had in the fire! But does not every poor worker show courage in each day of his or her life? Does it not take courage to rise every day only to face menial tasks just to live and also face the threat that even that work may be taken away?

Oro always showed joy. Could there have been more joy than when we ran together at la playa or when he played with Julio? And what joy I have felt when I was with Rosalia! Joy is in the music in church. It is in the sunrise.

How could there be more gentleness shown than Oro to Alicia? But what of Rosalia to me?

And what of innocence? Oro possessed it. He was guileless and did no harm. Instead, he acted without thinking of himself to protect others. But innocence was sometimes hard for me to find in myself and in los Estados Unidos. I needed to seek it. Then I found it everywhere, and not only in small children. It was in my ability to see only good and the selfless acts of others. It must be in the eye of an artist if he is to show what is good and not what is ugly and evil.

During my talk with Rosalia about Oro, I sketched without thinking. I drew the profile of Oro with my finger in a small patch of dirt. When I realized what I had done, I said, "He looked like this." But it was a very poor drawing.

Rosalia asked, "Do you draw? I like to draw." When I nodded, she said, "Wait," and ran to a group of her friends. She returned with paper and a pencil.

I redrew the picture of Oro, telling her of my sketching at la playa. When I finished, the drawing was not good. My skill had diminished over the months since the fire.

Rosalia said, "You draw good. May I have it?"

I told her I could do better, but gave it to her, anyway. After that afternoon with Rosalia, my heart had changed, and I began to draw again. That same evening, Rosalia collected paper, pencils, crayons, and colored pencils and brought them to me. She smiled when I told her they were great gifts, because drawing had always been part of me. I was beginning to feel whole again.

When I made room for the drawing materials in a drawer with my socks, I found the torn and battered map I had made to guide me north. It had fine decorations and drawings on it. I realized then that I had never lost my ability to draw. The urge to go north had given me a new direction that revived my ability to draw for that purpose, but I had not recognized it at that time. At that moment, I felt a strong desire to draw.

I began to sketch, choosing simple things — the truck that

Enrique drove, the tree with two trunks I had seen on my walk from the border, the cat-beast, and the abandoned cars.

Then, I sketched the Ortegons. First, Ramón and Luís kicking a fútbol. Then I drew Ramón, the older boy, quietly building a model car. Luís, who was always moving, I showed running and jumping. I tried to sketch his face having no cares, but it was hard to do. I drew the serious Catalina and the smiling Enrique. But Rosalia was the most difficult one to draw. Like my sister, Teresa, I could not capture the spirit within, although I tried hard. I wanted always to throw away the sketches of her, but she made me give some to her. Others in the house also asked to have my drawings. They all told me that I drew well, as well as an artist who sketched portraits at a nearby shopping center. Rosalia showed me where the artist worked. I looked carefully at her portraits and knew I did not draw as well as she did, but I also knew that someday, if I continued to practice drawing, I could do as well and maybe even better.

Although each day I did much the same work at the factory, every day was different. Except for cleaning the washrooms, the other work changed. Sometimes, when workers did not come in, I worked most of the day loading wood parts on carts, pulling the carts, and unloading them. Other days, I worked much of the time on the loading dock. And there were days when I only swept and cleaned.

At noon, I always ate sitting on the loading dock with Raúl and Manuelito. Sometimes, Enrique, Gilberto, and other workers ate there, too. As week followed week, Manuelito grew even more tired of his work. Each new day he lamented the condition of his life.

“The opportunities are poor, Manuelito?” Raúl asked.

Manuelito only smiled.

He was most depressed on Mondays, only to laugh and joke on Fridays. On Mondays, Raúl asked, “No success this weekend,



Manuelito?” when he saw his friend looking so sour. As August grew old, Fridays did not bring laughs, or even smiles, from Manuelito. He wanted to return to his home in México.

“Maybe it is this heat, which seems to have no end,” said Raúl. “It deprives us of sleep and everyone is depressed and irritable.”

Manuelito only shrugged. He wanted the feeling of home. He wanted a special girl, a girl all his own to be his friend and lover.

When I worked on the factory floor, I continued to watch the operations of the other workers, learning what they did and how furniture was made. Also, I stored in the eye of my mind the looks of the workers at their tasks: the concentration of the machine operators, the strain on the faces of those lifting on the loading dock, the skill of the assemblers applying veneer, the care of the Asians who finished the wood—their touch as though they stroked a baby. I tried to reproduce these scenes and faces in my drawings.

Also, I looked at the offices above the factory floor, where the managers worked, noting especially if any of them stood on the landing, looking down at the workers. On Tuesday of the last week in August, I swept the floor near some of the wood-shaping machines. When I looked up at the landing by the offices, three men stood there—the factory manager, the operations manager, and beside him another man with large bushy black hair. I stared at the third man, while I continued to sweep rapidly to show that I was working hard. I thought I knew him.

Then, I remembered! He was Rodrigo, the man with the spotted dogs. I wondered, Why was he here? I turned away so that he could not see my face. Maybe he came to see if the factory needed more workers. Did not Raúl say that he was paid to bring workers to the factory, and workers paid him also? But I had heard from Tony on the factory floor that work was slowing. So why was Rodrigo here? To find other work for those who would be let go? Or maybe new work was coming that would require hiring new workers.

I swept faster to appear busy. When I looked up again, Rodrigo stared down at me. He pointed at me and spoke with the operations manager. I turned away and continued sweeping.

When I looked up again at the offices, the men were gone, and I felt relieved that Rodrigo no longer watched me. But I was wrong. He had come down on the floor with the operations manager and walked among the workers. The operations manager watched the workers, but Rodrigo looked at me.

The two men talked together, and I wondered if Rodrigo asked how I came to work in the factory. Perhaps he felt cheated, since he received no money for my employment.

I tried to do my work so that I did not face them. Rodrigo chose a path that kept my face toward his. He looked at me over the machines and from behind the carts that held wooden parts. Then his face changed. His expression turned from puzzlement to an evil grin that made cold shivers run down my back. He turned and walked away. I knew he recognized me and remembered Oro and the fight we had with his spotted dogs. For the remainder of that day I felt very uneasy. Why did Rodrigo follow me and then identify me? Would I lose my job? I did not want to lose my job and have to return to stand at Dos As or work for the oranges seller. I needed to talk to Raúl about it after we finished work.

## CHAPTER 26

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AFTER WORK, Enrique drove home with Raúl and me in the truck cab. We were quiet for a while. Then, Raúl said, “I do not think that Rodrigo would remember you.”

“But he followed me, and I saw his face change when he looked at me. He recognized me.”

“If he did remember you, what would he do? Were you fired? It did not happen today. Enrique, have you seen him before?”

Enrique, driving, eyes on the road, thought for a moment. “Yes, a few times. He comes, walks on the floor, and looks around with Ortiz and the operations manager, then leaves. Sometimes a new worker comes later. Sometimes nothing changes. I saw him before you came, Raúl.”

“I do not think you need to worry, Ernesto,” said Raúl. “As Enrique said, he found this work for me where I met Enrique. Rodrigo has not been bad for me.”

“But why was he there?” I asked. “Some of the workers have told me that the work has been slowing.”

“It has been,” said Enrique, “but you told me you saw the salesmen coming and going and meeting with the factory manager. Perhaps new work is coming, and they will need more workers. I will talk to Ortiz. He will know.”

Still, I worried that the next day I would be let go from the factory. I did not want that. The steady work meant that I could send more money to my father. I was reminded that very day how much I wanted to send money home when another letter arrived from my mother. She thanked me for the money I had sent. Again,

she requested that I return to Pancho Villa. Everything, my mother said, was as when I left, except that emptiness took my place. My father and Teresa worked as before, but my father worked even more for neighbors. She did not say what work he did. My mother said she was beginning to work for my father as well as continuing her sewing. I did not understand what she meant, but she said again that my father wanted me to return. All this talk of work by my family made me wish even more that my job at the factory would continue so that I could send more money home.

The next two days, I noticed no changes at the factory from the day Rodrigo came. I was not told that I would no longer work there, but the talk of slowing work continued. I could not see any difference. Some workers said it came from the offices. Workers, they said, would be told to stay away for a time. If that happened, I knew I would be one of the first chosen to leave. I worried until after work on Thursday, when Enrique said that Ortiz knew of no changes.

That was the day before I would be paid for the month. I would earn a large amount of money. And I would send much of it to my father. At the end of work that day, I felt very good about my future.

The days had been very hot, causing the factory floor and the room above the garage to be hot. The shirts I wore to work became wet and stuck to me uncomfortably. I wanted to return to the used clothing store to buy lighter-weight, short-sleeved ones. I had been careful with my money and still had some remaining to buy shirts. Tomorrow I could not go; I would have to cash the check for my new money, pay for the room, and send money to my father. Saturday I collected cardboard. Sunday I could walk to the used clothing store and back, but it is a long walk. I could have waited until the next week, but I did not want to. So Enrique let me out at the used clothing store.

Raúl also went with me to look at the clothes. “I may find something I cannot resist,” he said.

“You have much resistance,” I said. “You buy very little for yourself.”

“I must buy little for myself, if I am to save enough for a business in Tijuana.”

I nodded that I understood.

I bought a short-sleeved brown patterned shirt that buttoned up the front and another tee shirt. It had baseball bats crossed on the back. Raúl found nothing irresistible.

On the walk to our room, we passed some stores and houses and other businesses along the boulevard. Many people were outside, because the heat made staying inside the houses uncomfortable. They strolled the streets, gathered in groups around stores and houses, sat on porches, waiting for a cool breeze. Some people appeared tense and irritable, perhaps because they were not sleeping well.

Raúl showed me una cantina where undocumented immigrants went sometimes. “Manuelito, Romeo, Jorge, and I have all gone there,” he said. “But it is risky, so we do not go there often, although it is a place to meet friends. It is air conditioned, but tonight would not be a good time to go there. With this hot weather, there could be fights, and police and la migra could come.” He was quiet as we walked past it. Then he said, “We have different places we go. But we do not have freedom, and we must be watchful. The immigration police could come to that cantina at any time. I have heard that they have raided it before and taken away many like me. Manuelito does not care if he is caught. I think he even seeks it. But for me to go there seeking friendship, only to be taken by la migra, would be a bad choice. Also,” he laughed, “other young men, border crossers, are like Manuelito. They think they are here only for a short time, for the money, of course, but also for adventure. They intend to return to México and are not

careful how they behave. Sometimes they get drunk, and then they can be the friend of no one. So I am content to have a few friends and to go to la cantinas only occasionally.”

He was quiet after that. I knew he wished for more freedom without the threat of la migra. I knew he also missed Teresa. Although he tried to hide it, I could see how he looked at girls we passed on the street.

We had gone about half a kilometer and turned from the boulevard to another street that was not as busy, when I saw three pochos the age of Raúl standing across the street. They wore their pants low on their hips, and their shirts were unbuttoned. The tallest wore a red band around his head.

“Quickly, Ernesto,” Raúl said quietly. “Follow me. We have little, but they may try to rob and beat us.” He turned back and quickly walked to the boulevard from which we had come. Before we turned the corner, the pochos crossed the street and ran after us. “Run, Ernesto.”

Raúl ran ahead of me along the boulevard in the direction of our room. He turned down an alley between two buildings, and I followed. But he was a faster runner than I, and the distance between us widened. He turned down an intersecting alley that ran behind the buildings facing the boulevard, with the backyards of houses on its other side.

When I turned to follow him, I looked back. The three still ran after us. Our running through the alleys had not deceived them. And they were gaining on us! The one who wore the headband was in the lead. The end of the alley, where there was a cross street, was a long way ahead. No other people were in the alley, and I thought we should have stayed on the boulevard where it was busy. Pocho gang members could not cause as much trouble there.

I ran as fast as I could, but as I neared the end of the alley and the cross street, Raúl was ten meters ahead of me. At the corner, he turned toward the boulevard.

When Raúl turned, I felt the hand of the pocho grab my shoulder. I yelled, "Raúl, Raúl," and dropped to my knees. The Chicano fell over me but held my shirt and pulled me hard to the pavement. I fell on my back, and my head hit the ground. The bag with my shirts flew away. My breath was thrust from me, and I gasped for it to return.

I turned to get up, but one of the other Chicanos kicked me in my side, and I rolled to the side of the alley against a fence. I glanced up and saw Raúl run to the one who had kicked me. Raúl put his shoulder into him and knocked him down. When he tried to get up, Raúl hit his face, and he stayed down. But the third pocho hit Raúl from behind, and Raúl staggered. The one with the red band was up, and Raúl faced two as he backed toward the wall of a building opposite where I lay.

I knew Raúl could not stand against two of them. I had to get up to help him. But the third Chicano was also rising. How could the two of us prevail against three? Then, I remembered the fight that Oro and I had against the spotted dogs. When attacked by the dogs, I found a board on the sand to use as a club, and Oro and I defeated them.

I looked quickly about me for something to use for a weapon. Two trash cans lay on their sides beside the fence, a lid near my hand. And beside it lay a stave that had fallen from the fence. I picked up the lid in one hand and the board in the other.

I ran to the Chicano who was rising and brought the lid down on his head. It made a loud crash as he fell back, stunned. I hit him again with the board, and he twisted on the ground, moaning.

The noise of the lid crashing caused the two other pochos to look my way. Raúl hit the larger one who wore the band, and he staggered back. The other turned toward me. I swung the stave at his head. He jumped back, but the edge of it scraped across his forehead. He yelled and put his hand to his head. Before he turned

from me, blood spread between his fingers. I swung again, catching him on the side of his head, and he went down.

The one with the headband recovered quickly and again faced Raúl. He took something from his pocket, and the blade of a knife sprang out from his hand. I yelled, "A knife, Raúl. He has a knife."

I ran and swung the board against the side of the Chicano as he thrust the knife at Raúl. The hand of the pocho passed by the side of Raúl who caught his arm, kicked up with his knee into the groin of the Chicano. He groaned and fell to his knees.

"Run, Ernesto. Run now," yelled Raúl.

I ran to the corner, turning toward the boulevard. Raúl was soon beside me. Running along the boulevard, we looked back, but the three did not follow us. Raúl led me through back streets and alleys, until we reached a street I knew to be near our room.

Then, Raúl stopped running. "Ernesto, we must walk. I am hurt." His shirt on the left side and his sleeve were red with blood. "Your blow may have saved my life," he said, "but the knife still cut my side."

As we neared the house of the Ortegons, Raúl became weak. He put his right arm on my shoulder and leaned on me. His face was set in a grimace of pain.

I called as we came to the door of the Ortegons. Enrique helped Raúl to a chair in the kitchen, where Catalina looked intently where Raúl was bleeding. Rosalia stood back, watching, her face filled with apprehension. Her brothers whispered quietly together. Catalina carefully removed the shirt he wore. When she lifted his arm, he winced but said nothing. The knife had made a long cut along the side of his chest and the inside of his arm.

"How did this happen?" asked Enrique.

"Pochos," Raúl answered.

"Three chased us," I said. "And one caught me. Raúl could have run from them, but he came back to help me."



“Pocho gangs must be avoided.” Enrique said the obvious, not knowing what else to say.

“We tried to ... .”

“Ernesto, your head.” Rosalia interrupted as she looked from Raúl to me. “It is bloody. Are you alright?”

“I am alright,” I said to sound brave, but my head hurt.

“We fought them,” I said, and I told of the fight. “But one drew a knife.”

“If Ernesto had not hit him,” said Raúl, “the knife would have entered my chest.”

Catalina remained silent as she cleaned the wound, but she shook her head.

“But we beat those Chicanos,” I said.

Catalina looked up at me and stopped cleaning the wound. She stared hard at me for a very long time. “You beat them? And do they have cuts like this?” She pointed to Raúl. “Will they have the scars that Raúl will have? Who is to say that you beat them? Today you have your lives. But what about tomorrow? Do you think they will not look for you?” She then told Rosalia to get antiseptic and bandages from the bathroom. But she continued to shake her head, and in a quiet voice said, “This fighting. This pride.”

I knew I was to blame. If I had not gone to the used clothing store, we would not have come upon the pochos. More, if I had never come to el Norte ... . Catalina knew, but did not say it. She had urged me to return to Tijuana when I first came to her door to find Raúl. I knew, as I looked at Raúl, that this was my fault. I will never in my life forget it. Later, I remembered the two shirts I had bought that were now gone. But they were so insignificant.

Catalina cut butterfly bandages that pinched the skin of the wounds closed without sticking to the wounds.

“Catalina is a good nurse,” said Enrique as he watched her work. “She learned to bind wounds when we worked in the fields.”

When Catalina completed the bandaging, tape and gauze covered the left side and left arm of Raúl. "If you are careful and rest, the skin should grow together and the wound will heal," she told Raúl. "If not, you may need to go to a hospital and have it stitched." She looked directly at him so that he would know that he must rest. "One week, at least, Raúl. Maybe two or three."

"Thank you, Catalina. I will not go to a hospital," said Raúl, as he stood from the chair. "But I must go to the factory tomorrow to receive my pay."

"You cannot," said Catalina.

"Ortíz will keep your pay and a place for you," said Enrique.

"Do you know that for certain?" asked Raúl. "What if I am gone for a week, or even two? What will Ortíz do then?"

Enrique did not answer. He knew that Raúl could lose the job.

"I will go to the factory tomorrow," Raúl said again.

"Pride," said Catalina. "Pride," and she shook her head.

Then she turned to me. "Now, Ernesto. Let me see your head." She cleaned the wound, while Rosalia watched. "It is not serious," she said. "It does not need to be bandaged."

## CHAPTER 27

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THAT NIGHT, Jorge and Romeo took blankets and slept outside on the grass beside the garage, where the air was cooler. I tried to sleep in the hot and stuffy room above the garage with Raúl. But sleep was difficult. My head hurt, and I could hear Raúl restless in his bed, groaning when he turned and felt pain. I could not shake from my memory the stare that Catalina had given me and the guilt I felt for causing his pain.

In the morning Raúl did not speak of his discomfort. He dressed slowly, because to lift his arm caused him pain. When we went to the house of the Ortegons, Catalina made him take off his shirt. She removed the bandage, examined the wound, and put on a fresh bandage. She said nothing, because she knew Raúl would go to work. But she shook her head to show displeasure.

On the way to work, Raúl rode in the cab of the truck with Enrique and Catalina. When Catalina left the truck to wait for her bus, I also rode in the front. Each time the truck struck a hole or stopped suddenly, Raúl winced.

When we walked through the gate to work, Enrique whispered, “Watch him closely, Ernesto. Help him when he needs it.”

I saw him also whisper to Gilberto.

That morning, I quickly cleaned the washrooms and then stayed with my broom by the loading dock. When I saw Raúl try to lift with one arm, I helped him. Gilberto did the same. Only once did I go to load and pull hand trucks and sweep by the machines. During the morning, Enrique spoke to Ortíz, and soon after, Raúl drove a forklift truck.

When we stopped at midday to eat, I asked Raúl, “How are you? Can you continue?”

He shrugged his shoulders and said, “It has been a long morning, but the day will end soon, and I will be paid. Then, with two days to rest, I will be well enough to continue to work again.” With his pain and weakness, his words were empty.

After eating, I returned to clean the washrooms and was working quickly, when I heard noises outside. Gilberto thrust open the door and said in a hushed, urgent voice, “Ernesto, la migra are here. They have blocked the gate with their cars. Come, follow me. I climb the fence in back. That is the only escape.”

Gilberto led the way, walking quickly to the back of the factory. He alerted Enrique and others as he passed them. A few left their work, but most remained. Some checked their pockets for papers. Enrique remained. Did he think he would be overlooked?

After we passed the machines that cut the wood and the assembly area, we came to a door at the back of the building. There, I suddenly remembered Raúl. Where was he?

“Gilberto, have you seen Raúl? Does he know of the raid?”

“He knows, but he cannot climb the fence. He would not follow me.” And he ran from the building.

I stopped and turned back to find Raúl. I hid behind a machine and looked back toward the assembly area and the machines beyond. Many of the workers continued at their stations, but a few, learning of the immigration officers, fled past me to the back door.

The factory manager and the operations manager left their offices with an immigration officer and led him to the floor, where he began to interrogate a worker who fumbled in his pocket for papers. Nearby, Enrique continued his work and tried to look unconcerned.

I crossed into the upholstery room and told Manuelito of the raid. He only smiled. I then walked quickly to the area where the furniture was boxed for shipment and to the loading dock. I

carefully looked out into the yard. Two cars blocked the gate, as Gilberto said. Two officers stood by the fence and questioned three of the workers. Raúl was not among them.

I looked quickly around the loading dock but saw no one. While I hid behind boxes and furniture, an immigration officer led a worker away. I looked carefully, and my whole body became limp with sadness. The worker was Enrique.

To hide myself, I moved back into a darker part of the loading dock where furniture was stored. There, in a dark corner, sitting on a forklift truck, was Raúl. His head lay down on the steering wheel. He only waited to be caught.

“Raúl, you cannot stay here. The immigration officers will find you,” I said.

“I cannot run. I cannot climb the fence, Ernesto. You must go.”

“No, I will not leave you. Come, let us hide. There are many places we can hide in this building, Raúl.”

“They will look everywhere. They have papers that permit it.”

“There must be a place.” I tried to sound hopeful, because this was not the Raúl I knew. He was without hope.

Then, I remembered that an immigration officer had been to the management offices, and the factory manager and operations manager had left.

“The offices, Raúl. Some are empty. La migra has been there. Maybe the officers will not return to them. They will not suspect that any of the workers will go there. Wait here. I will see where the officers are. When they go to the upholstery room, we will go to the offices. We will hide there until they leave.”

When I left to look for the immigration officers, I could see that Raúl had hope. I watched the immigration officers leave the floor below the offices and enter the upholstery room. Returning to Raúl, we crouched and walked quickly from one machine to another, until we reached the stairs leading to the offices above.

Those who remained at work ignored us. We sped to the top of the stairs and, crouching below the office windows, raced to the last two offices. The window blinds were open in the office of the operations manager. We could be seen in that office. The window blinds were drawn and the door closed in the office of the factory manager. We did not hesitate. I flung open the door and ran in with Raúl behind me.

We had just entered the office when I felt shock, and my heart pounded. Sitting in a chair by the desk was Rodrigo. A surprised look came on his face when he saw Raúl and me. Then he stood. His black hair fell across his face, and he pushed it back with his hand. He looked down at me, and an evil smile replaced the surprise in his face.

“Help us,” Raúl pleaded.

But Rodrigo only shook his head.

“But I paid you,” said Raúl.

Rodrigo only smiled his evil smile and walked toward us.

We backed out of the doorway to the landing. As we turned to run, we heard from below, “You, up there. Come down,” spoken in Spanish. Below stood an immigration officer. Beside him was the factory manager.

Behind us, the door of the office closed quietly.

The officer did not threaten us with a weapon. But the look of the factory manager, with his face red, jaw set, and lips a thin straight line, told me that we would never again work in that factory. We had gone to his office, a place where we were not permitted to go. We had crossed a forbidden boundary. We had crossed another border. So it is with los alambres, who cross one fence only to find many more.

When we reached the floor, Raúl spoke to the factory manager. I could see anger in his face. I understood the English words Raúl spoke. “You owe us! You owe us!”

The manager said nothing, but stared at Raúl with contempt, as one not worthy of a reply.

Defeat joined the anger in his face as Raúl confronted the defiant look of the manager.

The immigration officer began to question us. He asked for identification, but we said we had none. Then he searched us. When he touched the bandage that Raúl wore, he spoke to Raúl, and Raúl opened his shirt. The officer looked at the bandage and then looked Raúl in the eyes as he questioned him. Raúl shook his head and said, "No hospital." The officer nodded and took Raúl and me to join the others, who stood in a group in the yard. Enrique was already there as was Manuelito, who was taken from the upholstery room.

We had just joined the group when two officers led other workers from behind the factory building. Among them was Gilberto. We who had no papers waited in a group for la migra to bring a bus to take us away. Those with papers returned to work.

The bus took us to the center of the city, where we were led into one of the tall buildings. I was not afraid, because I was with my friends, and they were not afraid. Inside the building, there were officers who sat at tables. We all decided not to protest deportation. "If Gilberto and I seek asylum, we could be denied and risk deportation of our families," whispered Enrique. "If we alone are deported, there are ways to return." Raúl and I had no basis for staying in el Norte and no choice but to be deported. We all stood before the officers, gave them false names, and told them that we were from Tijuana. None of us contested return to México.

We then waited in a guarded room crowded with many others. There were not enough chairs in the room, so some stood and others sat on the floor. This room was one more indignity of the border crossers. We found a place in a corner where there was a chair for Raúl. Manuelito and I sat on the floor beside him, while Gilberto and Enrique stood.

Gilberto spoke. "We have worked for one month and received no pay. That factory has stolen a month from my life."

"They will pay you when you return. I am sure," said Enrique.

"How do you know that, and how do you know there will be work when we return?" asked Gilberto. "Already, the work was growing smaller. And why was Rodrigo there, as Ernesto has told us? I will tell you why. He was there to provide other workers to take our place. They will hire fewer workers who will work for less money. You will see. They called *la migra*. It was a way for them to make more money from our sweat. I tell you, there will be no work or money at that place when we return. But I will have my revenge, somehow. I believe, and I teach my children that anyone who does wrong against me will expect retaliation. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That is what I teach my children."

"Ortíz will take us back. He will save our pay," said Enrique. He spoke hopefully, but I detected doubt in his voice.

"Ortíz!" spat Gilberto, and he shook his head and flexed his arm in anger. "I cannot trust him now. He will feel my revenge."

"I do not think Ortíz knew about the raid," said Enrique. "Always before when the work slowed, he told me to stay home. He brought me back when there was more work, because I could operate many machines."

"Did he tell you to stay home before there was a raid?" asks Gilberto.

"I do not remember another raid. Do you?"

Gilberto hesitated. "No. But still I do not trust Ortiz now."

Enrique and Gilberto, these two friends, became silent, one hopeful, the other angry and disgusted.

"Did the factory managers call *la migra*?" I asked.

"Maybe. I do not know," Enrique answered slowly. He thought for a moment. "Maybe the *patróns* were dishonest, but before ... ."

"Maybe? Ha!" said Gilberto.



We were silent for a time. Then I asked Enrique, “What of Catalina? How will she know?”

“Ortiz will tell her, and the families of the others.”

He looked at Gilberto, who shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“Will she be alright?” I asked.

Enrique smiled. “You know Catalina. She is a strong woman. She will be alright. She will reach out a long arm to help me find a way back.”

“You will return soon?” I asked, looking at both Enrique and Gilberto.

“Of course,” answered Enrique. “Our home is here. Where else would we go? I have hope that someday there will be amnesty.”

Gilberto shook his head again as he listened to his friend.

“There is talk,” said Enrique, “that the government of the United States will grant citizenship to all illegal border crossers who have lived and worked here a long time. Then, Catalina, Rosalia, and I can apply for amnesty and become citizens. We will not always have to hide in the country where we live and where my sons were born.”

“You have much hope,” said Gilberto with a frown.

Raúl had remained silent while we spoke. He sat leaning forward in the chair, resting his head in his hands, elbows on his thighs. He was tired, in pain, and discouraged.

“And what of you, Raúl ?” I asked. “What will you do? Will you return also?”

He looked up and said, “Do I have a choice? What work is there for me to do in Tijuana? You know why I must return.” I, of course, knew that Raúl wanted to provide a good home for Teresa, and after meeting Rosalia, I knew better how he felt toward her.

“But I tell you, Ernesto,” said Raúl, “I will see things differently when I return.” His face was set with determination and pain. He stretched his legs out and leaned his head back in the chair to look

at the ceiling, grimacing as he moved. "When I return, I will see with eyes like our friend Oro, but not the Oro of four legs who was nearly killed by the spotted dogs. I will see with the eyes of the Oro of three legs who vanquished the spotted dogs, who found the wounded Guatemalan, who protected his friends when the way was dark. I will see in front and behind. I will be careful. I will know what to watch for and how to see what goes on about me. I will watch for attacks and la migra. I will never again be wounded or caught. And I will make the money I need." He was then silent.

But when I looked at Gilberto, I saw him shake his head.

"I will not return," said Manuelito. "I will go to my village. Money I have saved will be sent to me. I will have a great fiesta."

Raúl looked at him, "And will you have many opportunities with the girls?"

Manuelito only smiled.

And so did Raúl.

I was happy to see Raúl smile, but it was only for a moment. When I saw the pain return to his face, I spoke quietly to him. "This is my fault. I have caused you to be wounded. And by the evil smile of Rodrigo I know he sought to have me caught by la migra. Maybe Catalina was right. My pride has kept me here to cause only pain to my friends."

Raúl shook his head, "No, Ernesto."

Gilberto, hearing what I said, shook his head and laughed. "Would Raúl have done better against three alone? And with Rodrigo, you give yourself more importance than you deserve. He was at the factory before he knew you were there. The patróns are corrupt. They and the Anglos and the Chicano gangs seek to steal our lives. That is the truth. You are only one of many caught in their web."

Sitting and standing in the waiting room that night was uncomfortable, especially for Raúl. For a time he slept in the chair, and I was glad he could have a little peace.

During the quiet time, I asked myself what would I do after I returned home. I had been deprived of much money I had earned. I could not send more money to my father. Would he think I had been a failure? I did not want to face him. If he had not changed toward me, I would talk to Raúl about returning to el Norte with him. My first meeting with my father would be easier with my friends at my side than if I were alone. But what about later when I was alone with him? I did not know how to think about returning home. Scenario after scenario roiled in me through the night.

Early in the morning we lined up and climbed wearily into a bus for the trip to Tijuana.

PART 3

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THE RETURN



## CHAPTER 28

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THE DEPORTATION BUS to Tijuana caught every bump in the road, and its springs did not soften the ride. Raúl hurt with each movement. He could not rest at all. But I could not prevent sleep from coming. When I woke, as we neared Tijuana, Raúl was still awake and suffering. He faced the window, which reflected his squinting eyes and clenched jaw.

In Tijuana, the bus stopped at a gate where we filed past a guard into México and a long one-story wooden building. Because we had no papers, we were briefly interrogated and then released.

Outside the building, Gilberto asked, "They know you, Raúl?"

"No. I do not think they do, but I have been in that building before. They know señor Tejada and la cantina at la playa where I lived. I think all the police and officials know la cantina."

"And Ernesto, they know your father?"

"I was surprised, but he has worked on the roads for a long time and knows many people."

"But they said he had asked them to look for you."

"Yes. Another surprise." I did not say what I thought. I did not think he cared very much that I was gone, but maybe I was wrong.

"Why would the Méxicano immigration officers interrogate incoming Méxicanos?" asked Gilberto. "Would anyone try to sneak *into* México?"

We all laughed.

"Perhaps they look for criminals," said Enrique.

"I think not," said Raúl. "They let Gilberto in."

Gilberto looked hard at the pained, smiling face of Raúl and broke into a loud laugh. We all joined in.

The men leaving the building split off in groups or alone and headed into the city in different directions. Several, like Manuelito, walked toward the bus station. “I have always carried money for the bus to my town. I wanted to be prepared if la migra caught me.”

“Be careful with the girls or you will wake up with a wife and a family,” said Gilberto. “If that happens, you will have to return to el Norte to provide for them.”

Manuelito smiled. “Is that how it happened to you?”

Gilberto smiled in return and shook his fist at him.

Manuelito was happy when we said goodbye as he set off to catch a bus that would take him first east, then south to his village and his planned fiesta.

We had just said goodbye to Manuelito and turned toward Pancho Villa when I said, “I had heard that the *México* officers, who interrogate the returning border crossers, rob them, but they did not.”

“Perhaps they did nothing because they know señor Tejada and your father,” said Gilberto. “Did you have anything for them to take?”

“No.”

He laughed. “Then why were you worried?”

“In the possibility that we would be searched, I put my money in my underwear,” said Enrique.

“You wear underpants?” said Gilberto. “I thought you walked funny.”

We all laughed, even Raúl through his pain.

“If an officer would have searched me there,” said Enrique, “I would have picked him up and thrown him to the ground.”

We laughed loudly to even imagine that he could be so violent.

“And if you did that, he would have killed you or thrown you into a dirty *México* prison for the rest of your life. We would

not want your family to visit you in such a place.” Gilberto had just spoken when Raúl said he must rest. We found a wall for him, where he sat with his elbows on his knees and again held his head in his hands, but said nothing.

“Enrique, I do not want to touch your money. It is contaminated. Will you warn people when you use it?” Gilberto needed.

“It is wrapped.”

“In what? You could buy Méxicano money with it, but who knows where it has been? This is Tijuana, remember.”

More laughter. Even Raúl looked up and smiled.

I felt comforted to be back in México where Spanish was spoken everywhere. I was returning home. But for Enrique and Gilberto, it was a temporary home. After a few minutes, we continued to walk through the city to Pancho Villa, with Raúl leaning on Gilberto and stopping to rest when he could go no farther.

When we reached my home, my mother rushed out to greet us. I could see she was happy to see me. She immediately put Raúl in the bed of my old room and made Enrique and Gilberto welcome. Then she made food for us. And we told her what had happened at the factory and with la migra. She listened silently, looking at me with concern, and thanked my friends for taking care of me. While we rested, she found a neighbor, who was a nurse, to change the bandage on Raúl. From another neighbor, she borrowed folding beds and bedding for Enrique and Gilberto, while they went to telephone their families.

Teresa came home that evening and stayed with Raúl, talking with him, comforting him until she returned to Chapúltepec and her work..

My father also came home in the evening. Although it was Saturday, he had worked all day. He, too, greeted my friends graciously, but soon after we ate, he left again, saying that he had work to do. He returned about two hours later and took Enrique and Gilberto to la cantina to meet his friends.



On Sunday, only Enrique rose early to go to Mass with my mother and me. With money wired from his *México* wife, Gilberto left in the afternoon to visit her and his *México* family. He would not return to our house. Enrique telephoned again to Catalina and told us he would need to stay in Tijuana a few more days. We insisted that he stay with us.

The nurse, who had bandaged Raúl, said that he should see a doctor. My father took him to a clinic where his wounds were cleaned, stitched, and bandaged again.

In the evening, Teresa visited again and ate with us. After eating, the talk turned to the journeys Raúl and I had taken to Los Angeles and our work there. I told of my trip across the border: the dogs that attacked me; the coyote and his knife; the gang in the car who shot at me; the drifters in the burned house; Miguél who stole my food and money; my hunger; finding Raúl and the *Ortegon*s; selling oranges; working for the landscape *patrón*s and in the factory; the fight with the *Chicano* gang, the wounding of Raúl, and his bravery; and the arrest by *la migra*.

No one spoke while I told my story. My mother sat in her chair with her hands holding tightly to the arms of it. Her face showed much concern when I spoke of each threat I encountered and of my hunger. When I told of the fight, Teresa put her hand to her face. After I finished speaking, my mother said a prayer to the Lord and gave thanks for my safe return. She thanked Raúl for protecting me and Enrique for taking care of me. Through it all, my father sat silently, hearing everything, but expressing nothing.

My mother said that she did not want me to go north again. Teresa said the same to Raúl. But Raúl said that he must go. He repeated again that there was no work for him in Tijuana. If he would provide a suitable home for Teresa, he must work in el Norte and save money before returning to live in *México*. Teresa stayed to talk alone with him, but when she returned to her work

in Chapúltepec, she brushed away tears from her eyes before she kissed our mother goodbye.

Six more days Enrique stayed with us. Then he returned to los Estados Unidos with forged visiting papers to cross the border and a coyote to drive him to Los Angeles, all provided by Catalina.

Raúl slowly grew stronger each day. He benefited from rest, sleep, the cooking of my mother, and visits from Teresa.

I saw little of my father that first week. He worked all day on the roads, came home to eat and visit for a time with Enrique. Then he left with him to visit friends at la cantina or without him to work for neighbors. When I first returned home, he had welcomed me and even said he missed me. He said he was happy to see me, and he thanked me for the money I had sent to him. But he said little else. That first night he said, “Ernesto, do not return to el Norte. Stay here, and return to school.” He looked at me as if he wanted to say more, but he did not. Soon I felt that I had not been gone at all, that nothing had changed. And I returned to the city to earn money.

One evening, about a week after Enrique had gone and we had eaten, my father asked me to go with him to work. He said that he needed my help. We walked up the hill in Pancho Villa where a partially built house stood. It was made of concrete blocks like our house. Beside it lay a pile of timbers. “I am building this house for a friend,” said my father. “I need your help to put these roof beams in place.”

We worked until dark, placing and securing the beams. When darkness made further work impossible, we started the walk home, but my father stopped me. “Ernesto, I must talk with you.” As we stood beside the road, he said, “After the fire, I watched you.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. “You looked at me all the time. You made me feel that I was not providing enough money when we needed it. I was not working hard enough. I felt that I must find a way to earn more money.”

His eyebrows raised and he looked at me with surprise. “No! Ernesto, No! I saw how hard you worked, and how resourceful you were. For many years I have wanted to start my own business building houses. I know how to build, but I needed help. You helped me very much in restoring our own house without me saying much to you. I had hoped you would join me in building houses in the future, but then you went north. I did not know if I would ever see you again. I was greatly saddened. I know I have been a hard father, but life is hard. You needed to know that. I know you have now seen how hard life can be.” He stopped talking, and we walked farther. I thought he had finished, but then we stopped again.

“When I say that I want you to build houses with me, I do not mean simply to lay concrete blocks or place beams. If I succeed, I can find many workers who can do those things. I need help in the plans, the architecture. When I decided to enlarge our house, add a proper kitchen, bring in hot water, I did not know how to plan it. I knew I could build it, but ... .” He was silent for a moment, looking around at the surrounding houses. Then, he looked back at me. “You have a fine skill with drawing. I know nothing about that. If you are interested, I will help you to learn architecture, and together we can build houses. Tijuana grows daily. There is much need for good housing and many opportunities for one who knows how to build them inexpensively. I can do that, but ... .” He stopped talking, and we began to walk again.

Never before had my father spoken to me like that. He was not a talker. I always thought he was indifferent to my interests, that he thought of me not at all. But I was wrong. He had opened a very large door to the future for me, an opportunity I would not have dreamed possible. I could not speak at first. Then I said, “I did not think you liked me to draw. I thought you were always critical of everything I did.”

“I gave you the wrong impression.” He said no more, but I think he knew he had been critical of me. Both of us were

changing. That night was the beginning. Both of us saw each other differently. I said to him, "You are offering me a great opportunity." That night I began to be an architect, at least in my mind, and a partner in the future business with my father.

I also knew that my father should have spoken to me sooner. I was too afraid of him to be the first to speak. A father must talk with his children.

The next day, I knew I must do what I had not done before. I must do a task I had run from. I now felt free from the impediments that I had laid at my own feet. The talk with my father had cut loose the final cord that bound me to the past restrictions. I knew I must draw a picture of Alicia and Oro for señora García. After drawing at the house of the Ortegons, I knew I could do it.

On the streets of Tijuana I worked mainly delivering merchandise for store owners. Crossing to el Norte and learning a little English gave me credentials with the merchants to get the work. I earned more money than before I went north, most of which I gave to my father. With the remainder I bought good paper, pencils, pens, ink, some watercolor paints, and brushes.

I drew pictures at the table at home. At first, I sketched Alicia and Oro in different poses. I showed my first sketches to my mother and Raúl, who was recovering and even walking short distances. They told me which sketches they preferred. After many sketches, I decided to show only their heads together. Producing the sketches was very hard for me, because I remembered the sweetness of Alicia and the good times I had with Oro, times that would never return. Often, I had to stop drawing and walk around Pancho Villa before I could continue.

Not only did my mother and Raúl watch me draw, but my father did, also. He stood over me as I sketched, saying nothing. When he first watched me, I was nervous and did not sketch well. Later, I shut everything out of my mind except the drawing, and then I drew much better. Despite his talk with me, I still felt that

I must please him, that my sketches had to pass some kind of test of his. But as he looked at my later sketches, I saw him nod, as if he approved. I showed him the final sketch. He looked at it carefully for a short time. Then, he nodded. "It is good, Ernesto. It is very good."

I used pen and ink for the last pictures and completed them with watercolors. I made at least six before I had one I liked. In it, I showed the dark hair of Alicia lightened by the sun coming from the right. Her brown eyes I showed with a sparkle, and I showed her smiling as I often saw her. I placed the head of Oro by Alicia, head up to show his strength. And his eyes looked at Alicia to show his love. I painted his fur the golden color of the hills of Tijuana in summer, even as the hills I looked out on while I painted. But I could not show the eyes of Oro the way I remembered them. How could I draw his eyes to show alertness, sensitivity, love, strength, and innocence together? I could not do it.

After I completed the picture, I used money I earned to buy a frame with glass in it. With a knife, I carved the frame into a more beautiful shape and sanded it smooth. Then, I painted it the color of gold and attached a wire to it for hanging it. Finally, I put my picture into it.

I walked to Misión Sol and climbed the dirt road of the canyon to a dusty path that passed by the many shacks and crude houses of the people who lived there. Julio saw me coming and greeted me as a hero, because I had gone north. He took me by my hand and led me to his house. The house of the Garcías was small for so many children. Many different pieces of wood and tin covered it, like patches upon patches.

Señora García saw Julio pulling me to her house before I reached it. She came from inside and hugged me to her, as she would one of her own children. Julio looked on, waiting to hear my story.

"I heard that you had gone north," said señora García. "I am

so happy to see you back and safe. Ernesto, you should stay here with your father and mother. This is your home." She spoke with a smile and her words were meant for welcome and not for rebuke. She could not have known that her request for a drawing was a prod that sent me north.

She pulled me into her house, asking me questions about my journey, which I answered briefly, not telling her of the hazards, dangers, and difficulties I had confronted. Her house had three rooms. The front room held a table and some chairs. Against one wall stood a wood stove, crude counter, and a basin. Beds were rolled up against another wall. Two other rooms were for sleeping. We sat at her table and talked, while Julio stood restlessly, listening for a while. He quickly disappeared, when his friends stopped by the door.

When her questions slowed, I said, "I have brought you the picture you requested many months ago." I took it from a sack I carried it in and gave it to her.

She took the picture and quietly held it in her hands, looking at it carefully. She held it as though it were a precious treasure to be admired. After moments of silence, she looked at me and said, "It is beautiful. It is so beautiful. It is Alicia." Tears came to her eyes, spilled over, and ran down her cheeks. She put the picture on the table in front of her. For a long moment she looked at it. "It is such a wonderful gift." Then she held her face in her hands and sobbed. I, too, could not keep the tears from my eyes.

Before I left her house, she showed me that she would hang it on the wall of her front room to the right and below her picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then, she hugged me tightly.

The health of Raúl improved gradually under the care of my mother and Teresa. After two weeks stitches were removed and he was well enough to walk around Pancho Villa, although at first he walked slowly and for short distances. Within four weeks, he

walked much longer distances. During that time, Teresa visited him often, but her visits became shorter as time passed. He became restless. My father had tried to find work for him but was unsuccessful. Raúl had talked with others about work in Tijuana, but he could find none that paid what he needed. He knew he had only one choice, to return to el Norte. Thinking about his intended journey, he became irritable. Teresa did not want him to go north again and told him so each time she saw him. This disagreement with Teresa about what he felt he needed to do angered him.

During the fifth week, he left our house and returned to stay again in the room behind la cantina at la playa. He said he was a burden on our family. We protested, but he went anyway. He needed to be alone, to think about his future. He and Teresa met a few more times, but each time they parted with Teresa in tears. At the end of October he returned to el Norte.

Four weeks later a package arrived for me. It contained the clothes I bought when I was in Los Angeles and a letter from Raúl. He had arrived safely, which I already knew, because he had sent an earlier letter to Teresa. He was again living next door to the Ortegons in the room above the garage and working with Enrique in another shop, where metal parts were made. He worked only occasionally on the loading dock, as he did in the furniture factory, but was learning to operate machines. The pay was the same as before, but when he learned to operate the machines well, he would make more.

He and Enrique found the new work with the help of Ortiz, who had not known that la migra was coming that foul day. That very afternoon, he confronted the operations manager about the surprise raid and asked that wages be held for the workers who were caught and that jobs be made available for those who returned soon. They were good workers, he said, and valuable to the company. The operations manager ignored him. And when

Ortiz protested to the factory manager, he was told nothing would be done. For the rest of that week he thought about the raid and the part the management played in it. He knew that work had declined and workers had been cheated out of their wages. He knew he worked for a corrupt company. Even though he had a family to support and many personal obligations, he quit after working there for eight years. He said the company had become dishonest and would not be successful in the future. Because he expected the company to fail, he knew he would have to find new work soon, anyway.

He had a good reputation and, after three weeks, found new work. Soon, he found a place for Enrique. Gilberto had returned and found work at another loading dock. When Raúl returned, Ortiz and Enrique found work for him.

Ortiz became my example for treating workers. He firmly but patiently taught the skills needed in the work tasks. He was loyal to those who worked hard, but disciplined those who needed it. He was always honest, forthright, and fair. Raúl was fortunate to know him and Enrique.

Also, in the package Raúl sent, between two shirts, I found the pictures of Rosalia that we took after the movie and an envelope with the little money I had left in the room. I was very happy to see the pictures of Rosalia, and I put them on the wall over my bed.

Letters passed between Teresa and Raúl, but as month followed month they diminished. A wedge had come between them, a wedge of separation, a fence, the border. The hammer of time beat upon that wedge and drove them apart. Letters from Raúl stopped after about one year, and I never heard from him again. I wrote to Rosalia twice, but my letters were never answered. So, contact with my friends in the north ended, and I began a new life.



With the hard work of my father and myself I became an architect. Beginning with concrete blocks and discarded garage doors from the north, we built small houses and grew a thriving business constructing houses and buildings in Tijuana. My father and I now talk and argue freely. We have changed.

## EPILOGUE

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### Thirty Years Later

MY SON, I HAVE WRITTEN this long account of my border crossing to you for a reason that I will explain. The pictures of Rosalia have gone, replaced long ago by photos of an even more beautiful woman, your mother. And, of course, your uncle, Luis, had something to do with the separation of your aunt Teresa and my great friend, Raúl.

Now, my son, you know why I gave you your two names. The first, for your grandfather, my father, who has made possible the life I have now; the second, for my friend Raúl, who was my hero, my guide and protector at a time when I was in great need.

For many months I have written this memoir. I tell you this story now in 2005, because I see the way you and your friends look to el Norte as a place of safety and opportunity. Some fathers in México and Central America, where there is great danger, may urge their sons to leave home and seek safety and prosperity in el Norte. But I do not. My experience strongly suggests that you remain here at home. I know the violence in the city is a constant incentive to flee. I know you worry about the drug gang wars here and the kidnappings, especially the kidnappings of children of successful businessmen. I know you worry about yourself, but also about me and all of our family. But you do not need to worry, and you definitely do not need to go north. Some of your friends may think they have little choice except to go, but you do not need to

go. No, my son, do not think of going north. You will not find safety there. We need to talk so that I can explain how you are protected. I need to hear your concerns as you see them.

Since I went north those many years ago, there is more danger now along the border. The border is being strengthened by la migra because of the attacks by terrorists on los Estados Unidos in September 2001 and the growth of the drug traffic. They are trying to prevent terrorists from entering their country and to stop the drug traffic being carried out by very dangerous men. Those drug gangs control the coyotes now. Even if you did not use a coyote, you would be in great danger going north alone or with friends. Despite the stronger borders, more watchful la migra, and danger, there are still many desperate people going north. The flood of those seeking work and the growing number seeking asylum continues north from all over México and Central America. Even though many factories, *maquiladoras*, have sprung up in Mexico along the border, they do not provide enough work, especially for men. Even the reinforced border cannot hold back the flood. Weaknesses will be found in it. Like water finds the tiniest holes, leaks will occur, trickles here and there. Each trickle winds its way to small lakes in el Norte where friends, relatives, people of the same village make their homes, where new border crossers can make a beginning. And there continues to be work there, work the Anglos will not do for the wages offered.

But you have no relatives or friends to go to. You would not find los Estados Unidos the way we saw it when I took you there twice on business trips. There are no guarantees of work or future citizenship. Amnesty was granted to long-time illegal immigrants many years ago, in 1986. I am certain that Raúl, Enrique, Catalina, Rosalia, and Gilberto are now citizens there, but you cannot expect there to be another amnesty. There is sentiment against it in los Estados Unidos, especially for new arrivals. There, you would be without a country, always hiding.

You do not need to be desperate. We can protect you here. We have our ways based on long-time contacts in the city. You can stay in México and find your own path or work in the business of your father, grandfather, and uncle. We are planning to expand to the south where it is safer. As you know, we have a good business. We began by making small houses with concrete blocks and discarded garage doors from los Estados Unidos. Now, we build many types of houses and even large buildings. The need for housing in México will continue to grow. But even if you do not work with us, you can have an education to do what you want to do and to live among friends and family, not in some country where you will not feel welcome.

We must talk. Do not make the mistake about your father and his love for you that I made about mine. Let us go to la playa and walk along the sand. I know that you, too, like your sisters, your grandmother, and me, have the gift for art. I know you like to draw. I will bring some paper. We will look for charcoal in the sand and sit together and watch the waves, the people on the beach, the sunsets, and we will draw. Let us sketch together. Let us talk together. Talk to me about what you want to do. Let us imagine future opportunities and discuss them. Let us never stop talking to each other.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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BORN AND RAISED in Southern California, Robert L. Phen holds BS and MS degrees in Engineering from UCLA. A 40-year engineering career included the final twenty-nine years at The Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, primarily in supervisory positions responsible for specific areas of advanced studies, research, and development. His work included co-authoring papers and reports on a variety of subjects. Phen began writing fiction as a hobby in the 1970s through a class at a local community college. He entered the college's writing competitions and was encouraged by winning two prizes. After completing drafts of two books he stopped writing for some time due to growing demands at work and at home. After retirement, and taking another writing class, he joined Pasadena-based Merano Writers Group and completed three books and a large number of short stories. *The Eyes of Oro* is his first published work of fiction. Phen is married and has a daughter and two granddaughters. He lives in Southern California.