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MARIO

A Mexican Boy's Adventure

By

MARION GARTHWAITE

Illustrated by Ronni Solbert

DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC. • GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

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THE CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY ARE FICTIONAL WHICH IS TOO BAD, BECAUSE THE REAL PEOPLE WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE FUN TO WRITE ABOUT.

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To the friendly people on both sides of the border who made our six years in Imperial Valley exciting to remember, and our many trips to Baja California delightful adventures.

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Baby owlet, purple owlet,
Singing as dawn shines above,
Won't you lend me your swift pinions
Won't you lend me your swift pinions
Won't you lend me your swift pinions
That I may fly to my love?
That I may fly to my love?

If I were a little owlet
I would never steal away;
Till my wings were strong and steady
Till my wings were strong and steady
Till my wings were strong and steady,
Safe within my nest I'd stay.
Safe within my nest I'd stay.

MEXICAN FOLKSONG

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A FISH FOR MARIO

VOICES rose and fell from the schoolrooms around the open court of the ancient church in Loreto. The fierce afternoon sun of Baja California poured down upon the cobblestones and was reflected into the open doorways.

Mario waited impatiently for the bells to ring. It

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had been a long day, crowded into a seat too small for two. Mario was eleven and the smallest boy in the sixth grade. His seat mate was Carlos, who was thirteen, and one of the biggest. Each day between them there was a silent battle for space to sit and room to work.

The bells remained dumb and Mario tried to keep from squirming. He sat braced against attack, not choosing to risk sprawling on the floor and being kept after school. Today was too important. Today he would get a fish, the best of the catch, if he could get out to the Flying Sportsman's Lodge when the boats came in. Up until now the chances of Mario's getting a fish, with the big town boys there, had been hopeless.

Today was different. Today he could choose his own fish.

Mario lived with his grandmother, whom he called La Vieja, the Old One. This was a good name for her because she was full of wrinkles, and wisdom and wiry strength. Their one-room hut, with its thatched roof of clean, cut palm fans, stood rooted in the hard-packed earth, behind a cactus

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fence that leaned this way and that, and sometimes went down completely in a high wind.

Old trees shaded the house and most of the bone-clean yard. Three goats had nibbled the leaves and twigs as high as they could stand on their hind legs, until the trees looked as though they had been shaved with a knife.

The white goat and the brown one were good and gentle creatures, satisfied to stay where they belonged, to come when Mario called them to be milked. The black goat was wicked and possessed of a devil. Not even the cactus fence that Mario had mended in a hundred places could keep her in. She wandered where she chose in the jungle of cactus and mesquite that bordered the road to San Xavier. Then Mario must feel all over her legs for thorn wounds, because she stopped for nothing when the desire to return to the hut of La Vieja came upon her.

Because she was so much trouble, Mario loved Negra, the Naughty One, better than both of the others together.

Mario was small but he was tough as a mesquite root. Anyone who chops into that wood knows it has

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the strength of iron and burns into the best coals for toasting tortillas.

He was quick to learn the things he liked, especially biology, because he wanted someday to be a doctor like Dr. Gabriel Iturbe. When someone was hurt at a distance from Loreto, and it was after school, Dr. Gabriel would let Mario ride out with him to hold his instruments or fetch water. He showed Mario how he cared for cuts and poisoned thorns and broken bones. These things Mario learned and remembered. But he was slow as the turn of the tide when it came to learning to speak English or to read from the one reader in his classroom.

"You need to learn to read and read fast, Mario," warned Dr. Gabriel the day he showed Mario over the hospital being built out at the edge of town. "There will be lots of reading before you can be a doctor. And you will have to learn to speak English so you can doctor the Americanos who come down here to fish and hunt, as well as our own people." Dr. Gabriel brushed up his mustache with a bent finger and shook his head at Mario.

But to Mario the English language didn't make

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sense. One did not know, in that tongue, whether a chair was a man or a woman. There were too many ways to spell the same sounds, like the sail of a boat and a sale in the market. It was a language full of traps, not soft and beautiful like the Mexican words.

He knew he could earn more *pesos* if he could speak the language of the men who came down to the lodge to fish. They might sometimes choose him to run their errands instead of the older boys. The *pesos* he earned would help buy flour for tortillas and beans for the bean pot and keep Mario out of the orphanage in La Paz. Each day he told himself that tomorrow—*mañana*—he would learn to speak English.

Yesterday he had met the American lady-who-flies-her-own-plane. She was down on the beach picking up shells. She had a handful of shells hugged to her chest. Her hands were big and her feet were big. Not like the dainty feet of La Vieja. But the grandmother was a tiny woman, hardly bigger than a pelican, and old and white-headed and wrinkled.

This American woman was tall and big-boned, with hair the color of palm thatch. She strode down

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the beach like a man, her big mouth smiling and her blue eyes friendly. "Shells!" she boomed in Spanish. "I've never seen such shells. I collect them. What's your name?"

"Mario, *señora*."

"No *señora* to it. I'm an old maid," she bellowed cheerfully.

Mario had run all the way home to choose a shell from his collection in a corner of La Vieja's hut. It was a creamy white shell with a rose-pink lining. He took it back to the big American woman-who-flew-her-own-plane. He liked her and her gruff way. He was sorry that she was alone in the world, which was a sad thing.

She was delighted with the shell. "Haven't a *centavo* on me, boy. Look! I'm going fishing tomorrow. Be at the dock when we come in. You can have the pick of the catch. How about it?"

Mario beamed at her. La Vieja would be glad to have some tender fish to eat, instead of the hard beans he had let cook dry yesterday.

As he waited for the bells, his eyes sparkled as he thought of it. What a fine big fish he would choose!

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He was outside the walls of the church by the time the bells had stopped ringing.

Mario turned a deaf ear to the shouts of the other boys. He ran down the dusty street between the adobe houses, ducking around the corner to the Post Office.

The postmaster looked up from his work. "No letter for you or your grandma, Mario."

"It is not a letter, Tío. It is my shoes. Will you keep them, *por favor*?"

The postmaster leaned over the counter. "Why then should I keep a pair of dusty shoes? Is this a shoe shop?"

"Por favor?" Mario's gray eyes were pleading. He stooped to untie his shoe laces. "See, Tío. Today I will get a big fish. The American lady, the one-who-flies-her-own-plane, she has said so. I gave her a shell—a good one—and she said that she goes with the boats today. She said I can choose what I like from her catch."

"Holá! Then the big boys will not push you away and take all the fish, *verdad*?"

Mario nodded. "For a week now, I have tried to get a fish. La Vieja, she says her jaws ache from

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chewing on the hard beans I cook." He pulled off his shoes and held them up. "If I help with the boat——"

"*Sí.* The salt water would ruin your good shoes.

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You must take care of the shoes we give you. Hand them here."

Mario handed up the shoes and darted out the door. He crossed the square where the shade trees threw long shadows across the broken cement. He hoped no one in the airplane office or the store would see him. Many people shook their heads when they saw Mario on the street after school.

"That Mario! All the time playing in the streets," they muttered. "See how he wastes his time. He is too young to look out for La Vieja, and she—*pobrecita*, poor little creature—is too old, too feeble to look out for him. We should send him to the orphanage in La Paz to learn a trade."

The orphanage was the one great fear in Mario's life. Ever since the Big Storm had swept away all of Mario's family in Loreto, except La Vieja, there had been talk of the orphanage. Sebastian had been there. He had lived to return to Loreto and tell of it. It was like a jail, he said, with bars on the windows. And work. All the time bells ringing—do this—do that—and work, work, work. Mario knew that if it hadn't been for Dr. Gabriel and La Vieja he would have been sent to the orphanage long ago.

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Mario ran down between the adobe buildings with the sun hot on his back. He hurried by the high palm trees where the buzzards shuffled and muttered, waiting for the cleaning of the evening's catch of fish. Mario waved gaily at them. He, Mario, would have a big fish to clean, a *cabrilla*—well, anyway, at least a *bonito*—— "You can quarrel over what I do not choose to keep," he told them. "I will make you a feast."

As he climbed the steep steps to the concrete breakwater, the old sea wall that guarded Loreto from the waves in the time of high wind, he was talking to himself. "If it is a big fish, it will be enough for many. I shall keep for La Vieja and me only what I can cook for three days. I shall give some to Tío for the shoes. I shall give a piece of this fine fish to teacher, for the pencil she lets me use, when I have no *peso* to buy one. I shall give some to the *padre*, and all the rest I will give to Dr. Gabriel.

From the top of the sea wall Mario looked anxiously down the beach to the dock that ran out from the Flying Sportsman's Lodge. There were a few upturned boats along the beach, but no boats at the dock. He shaded his eyes and looked out across the

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Gulf to the long barren islands that guarded the Bay of Loreto. There were no fishing boats in sight.

"Good!" he said aloud, as he turned to run down the long sea wall. The boats must have gone to Nopolo. He would be in time to watch them come in, to see in the deep boxes the beautiful big green and silver fish, one of which would be his to choose.

He climbed down the sloping cement to the beach. It had been a long time since he and La Vieja had eaten fish.

Mario sighed when he remembered the good days of other years, when his father had brought in whole boatloads of fish. There had been *pesos* then for shoes. While his father lived, no one had to give Mario shoes, or pencils either. That was before the day of the Big Storm, when the very devil of a *chubasco*, a high wind, had lifted the sea waves over the sea wall into the town itself.

Mario's father had been drowned, trying to save his boat. His mother and little sisters had been swept away with the palm-thatched hut that had been their home. Only Mario had been saved, because he had been sent to help La Vieja. She lived with her goats out beyond the water pump, in the cactus

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jungle on the western edge of town. The hut was too sturdy for the wind that could whistle right through it. The waters did not reach that far.

Mario walked down the beach along the wet sand. He stooped now and then to pick up a shell. Any one of these shells, he thought, might be just the one the American lady would want.

The palm trees along the beach rustled softly in the sea wind. At the brush hut that was Luis Diego's house, long lines, strung between the palm trees, were hung with slabs of shark meat drying in the sun. Mario wrinkled up his nose at the smell from the piles of shark fins. Sharks were the devils of the sea, he thought, evil creatures not fit for man or buzzard. His father had hated sharks and cursed them when they followed his boat and swallowed his catch.

When Mario reached the lodge, he sat down on the cement dock, in the shade of the adobe wall. He knew better than to go inside the gate, where the guests sat around the turquoise pool, sipping cool drinks under the palm-thatched roof or lying in the long chairs, smoothing themselves with oil, baking in the sun to get their skins as brown as Mario's.

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At first he was alone, watching the shadows lengthen as the sun slid down behind the palms. The waters of the Gulf were green near the shore where the lazy, curling waves made scallops of white foam, then green blue, dark blue, and finally deep purple out by Carmen Island. He watched the island change to a soft rose and then bone white gashed with canyons of blue shadow.

Mario thought of what Dr. Gabriel had said of this land. "Baja California is beautiful—beautiful and cruel. It is a land barbed with cactus, ridged with rocky peaks, parched for water. But it is full of golden light, all but ringed by a sea of a thousand colors, shadowed in purple and blue." Mario knew that the sea, dreaming in the sun, was, like the land, beautiful and cruel. Beneath the changing colors, the waters teemed with fish to eat and fish to fear, and always, he remembered, these same waters were ready to rise in fury at the call of the wind.

Other boys joined Mario, bigger boys who grinned at him as if to say, "You here again? What makes you think we will let you have a fish. Ho! Not a chance!"

Mario tossed his curly head, his gray eyes snap-

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ping. "You will see," he muttered to himself. "Today I shall get a fish, the biggest *cabrilla* that is left after the cook and the fishermen have chosen. It will be mine, to drag along the beach and through the town. It will make three days of fish stew for me and La Vieja. It will be many presents to give." His heart sang at the thought of it.

There was a shout from one of the boys. They all turned toward Nopolo and the jagged peaks to the south. A white speck could be seen on the water. "A boat comes! A fishing boat!"

Other people came down to the dock, guests from the lodge, the cook from the kitchen, some men from the town with nothing better to do, and the boys. Luis Diego came, too, hoping, thought Mario, to get something better than shark meat to take home with him.

As the boat cut her engine and eased slowly in, Mario could see the American lady, her straw-colored hair blowing in the wind. She was laughing and waving to the guests on the dock. His heart felt thick in his chest. Would she remember the beautiful white *concha* with the pink lining?

She was pointing to something draped across

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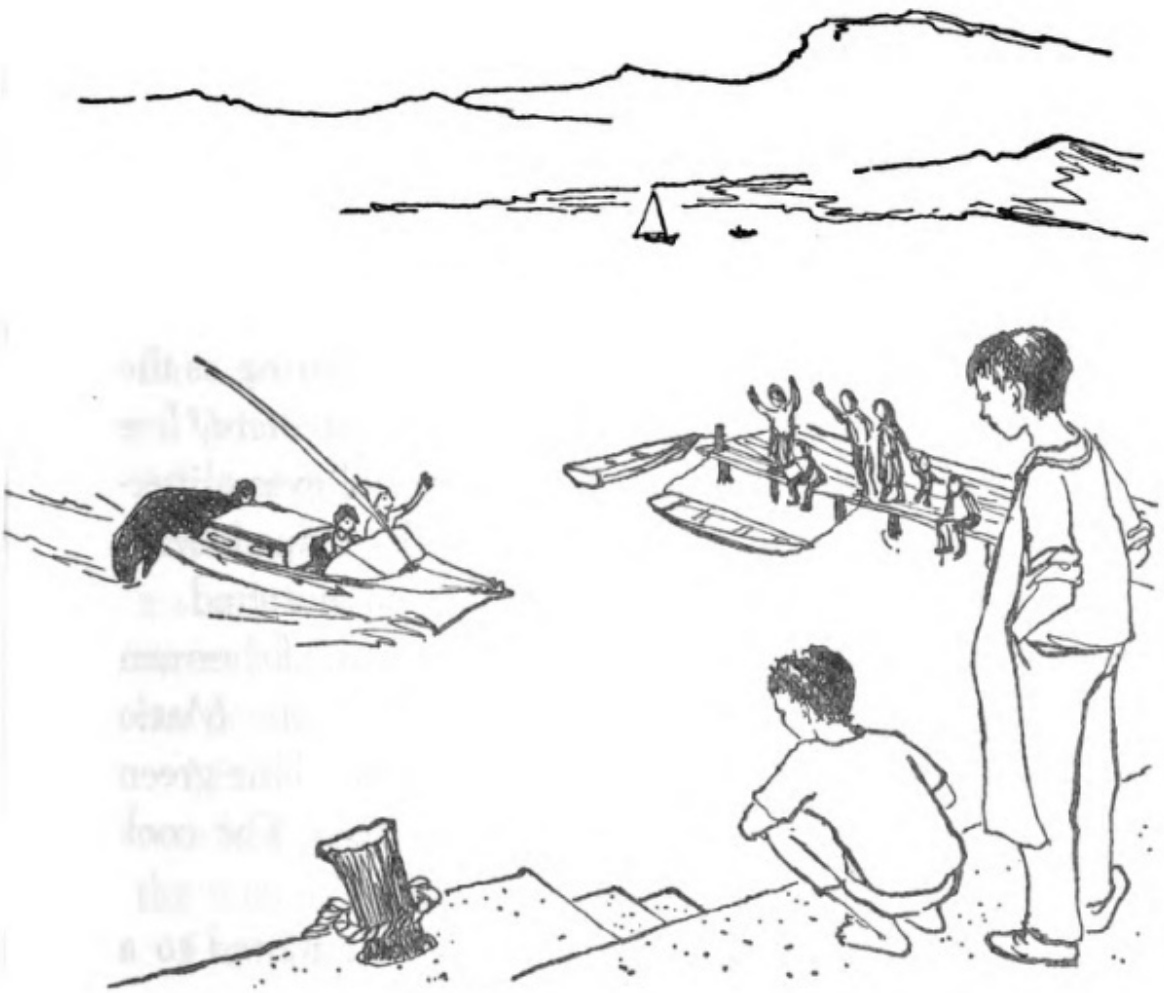
the stern of the boat. A wave of laughter ran through the gathered guests. They clapped each other on the back and shouted at her.

But the fishermen in the boat looked sullen. The cook spat into the water beside the dock. *"Malo! Malo!* Bad business!" he muttered. "She is bringing



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a shark. A hammerhead. These crazy Americans! This one is pleased to catch a shark!"

The fish were lifted out of the deep box, carried along the dock and inside the gate of the lodge. Here a high scaffold with gleaming hooks and large scales waited to weigh in the fish.

Mario's eyes were sparkling as he looked at these fine big fish lined up all across the bar of the scales. Plenty of fine fish for everyone, the cook, the fishermen, and Mario.

Two men muttering, "*Mucho trabajo!* Too much work!" brought up the shark. It was too long to hang on the lower hooks. They hoisted it to the upper bar. The American lady stood beside it, laughing as the cameras clicked. The dead shark hung there, five feet of sooty black body, with tiny, evil eyes glittering at either end of the blunt, mallet-shaped head.

Mario shuddered. "*Malo! Malo!*" he muttered.

When the picture taking was done, the fishermen came up to take their pick of the catch. Mario watched them choose the biggest of the blue-green fish. No matter, there were plenty more. The cook came and chose the next best.

Mario's heart was choking him. He moved to a

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place beside the gate, trying to catch the eye of the American lady.

She was laughing, a great booming laugh. She was showing the men how she had caught the shark. She looked up and saw Mario, his whole heart in his eyes.

"Mario! Come here!" she called to him in Spanish.

Mario came shyly in the gate, wishing he had not left his shoes at the Post Office.

"Mario, did you see my shark?" Her voice was a shout. "Imagine me—catching a shark! Look, Mario! I promised you a fish for that lovely shell. You shall have my prize. My beautiful shark!"

What was there to do—to say? Mario could not refuse a gift. That would not be polite. This American lady-who-flew-her-own-plane did not know that a shark was an evil thing, that shark meat was not sweet like the meat of a *cabrilla*. She was giving him her prize, the best she had.

Mario murmured, *"Gracias, señorita."* He watched with stricken eyes as the boys bargained for the remaining fish.

Luis Diego carted off a shining green and white

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fish half as long as he was. He laughed at Mario as he passed him. "Shark meat! A shark is a wicked creature and will stick in your throat. Who wants shark to eat?"

Nobody, thought Mario bitterly, as he tied a bit of rope above the tail of the shark. He was bent almost double and the rope cut into his shoulder as he dragged the heavy, black creature behind him down to the hard sand by the water.

He saw a brown and purple shell at the water's edge. It was a good shell, maybe even a rare one, but he did not stoop to pick it up. "Let her find her own shells!" he muttered. "She who buys fine shells with shark meat!"

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"SHARK MEAT!"

NOBODY wanted shark meat. Mario stopped on the way home at the brush hut of Luis Diego to ask if his father would buy the dead shark, for even a few centavos.

"No," said Luis Diego's father. "The lines are full. The hung meat is almost dry and ready to ship. I don't want to mess around with just one shark."

Mario dragged the heavy fish up onto the sea wall. It was easier to pull along the cement, though it caught and stuck at every broken hole.

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Two of the bigger boys passed him, carrying a twenty-pound *cabrilla* between them. "Hi, shark meat!" they shouted.

Mario plodded grimly on, with the leaden fish dragging behind him. God provides fish for the hungry, thought Mario, but surely a shark was the work of a devil.

At the street into town he dropped the shark on the top step of the sea wall. He pushed it off, down the steep steps. It fell with a sickening plop! down two steps and lay there. It was the color of a worn-out rubber tire. It sprawled, half off the step, one wicked dead eye leering up at him.

"You devil!" shouted Mario. "I'll show you!" He jumped down and kicked at the big fish. But he only bruised his toes. The black body lay inert and unyielding. He pulled on the rope and dragged the shark off the steps, through the dust of the road into town.

He stopped at the Post Office to get his shoes, tying them by the shoelaces around his neck.

The postmaster snorted when Mario asked him if he would like some shark meat. "Is that what you have? It is not worth hauling home. I will tell my

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wife to send over some good vegetable soup for La Vieja, since she is tired of your miserable beans."

"Many thanks, *señor*, but I can make vegetable soup myself," Mario said crossly. "I will hoe in *Señora* Paula's garden. She will give me vegetables to pay for it."

The postmaster nodded. "A good idea. A better way to spend your time than running out to the lodge for nothing."

Mario dragged the shark out the long road to the tiny hut where he lived with his grandmother. He did not have the heart to offer it to anyone else.

La Vieja was not pleased to see what he was bringing home. "*Malo! Malo!* Shark meat does not rest easy on an old stomach. With you gone all day I must beat out tortillas. I must bend my tired bones to milk two goats. I am old and ill and about to die, and you bring me shark!"

Mario cut off a few pieces of meat and saved the liver. He dressed himself in the heavy leather shirt and leggings that had belonged to his father. He dragged the rest of the shark up the road and into the tangle of cactus. Dogs, coyotes, and the town buzzards would soon clean it up.

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He cooked the shark meat, making a soft stew of it. La Vieja ate a little, with much mumbling and grumbling. Afterward she crawled off to her bed on a goatskin in a corner of the hut, pulling the woolen blanket over her head.

Mario wrapped the rest of the meat and the liver in a cloth, putting it and the earthen dish of stew on a shelf by the door. He pushed the live coals into a heap in the middle of the flat stove, made of rocks, covering the warm glow carefully with ashes. He took the tin pail from its place in the corner near his heap of shells. He watered the trumpet vine that covered the front of the hut and poured the rest into a stone trough for the goats. With the empty pail, he set off down the road in the dusk to the nearest house that had a faucet with running water.

When he returned, the night had shut down upon the mountains behind the town. The stars were trembling, white-hot sparks in a dark sky. Below the town and the beach the sea lay like a streak of silver steel, between Loreto and the island. Mario stood in the dooryard and sniffed the soft night wind. It smelled of trumpet vine, of dust, of goats, and—Mario's nose wrinkled in disgust—of shark.

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Late that night Mario stirred in his sleep as he felt La Vieja's hands tucking his blanket about his shoulders.

There was fish stew and hard beans for breakfast. La Vieja turned her face to the wall when he offered them to her. He bolted his own breakfast, rolled a tortilla to put in his pocket for lunch. He milked the two goats, gave an extra armful of hay to Negra, the Naughty One, penned now because she would soon have a baby goat.

He pushed his fists into his pockets against the cold dawn and went off down the road to school. In the early morning light the sea held all the colors of the inside of an abalone shell. The mountains to the south looked cold and blue and jagged against a golden sky. All about Mario lay beauty too deep for words. A mockingbird whistled from a mesquite tree and Mario whistled back. It was a new day. It was good to be alive.

The day before and his disappointment over the shark were behind him. Tonight he would cook the shark liver for La Vieja. She would like that, he felt sure. After school he would go over to *Señora* Paula's and work for some vegetables to make a good soup.

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But at school Mario found that yesterday was not behind him. The whole town knew about the shark. The boys thought it was a good joke on Mario.

"Hi! Shark meat!" shouted Carlos as Mario came through the archway of the old church into the play yard. Carlos blew a big pink bladder of bubble gum, popped it, and sucked it in again. Carlos had money to buy gum. He brought the gum to school and sold it for a pencil or a *peso*. To everyone but Mario. Mario yearned to blow pink bubbles like the others, but he never had any money.

"Shark meat! Shark meat!" shouted all the boys. At Mario's dark flush, the game became more fun. They made swimming motions like a shark twisting to attack another fish. They held their noses when they came near Mario, shouting, "Phew! He smells like an old pile of shark tails!"

It was fun for everyone but Mario. His smile wore thin, his hands were clenched in his pockets. The teasing followed all through the day. Even in the English class Carlos chose for his word to write on the board, "*Tiburón*—shark." This drew giggles from the whole class until the teacher rapped for order. Later, at the same desk with Carlos, when the

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teacher's back was turned, Carlos held his nose and shut his eyes tight. The whole class was fairly bursting with bottled laughter.

That day the doctor brought the American lady-who-flew-her-own-plane to visit the school. This delighted Carlos. "The woman of the shark," he murmured, as the class rose to its feet. "It is your shark friend," he whispered to Mario.

"Shut up!" hissed Mario.

"Quiet, boys!" warned the teacher.

The doctor was showing the American lady the pictures the boys had drawn for biology. "This one of the heart and lungs is Mario's," he was saying. "I think I am going to make a doctor out of Mario."

"All doctors are sharks," whispered Carlos. He was pleased with his own wit.

I will punch him in the head, Mario promised himself, as soon as school is out.

The American lady walked over to the shelf under the window. Here there was a collection of all kinds of things, the jawbone of a mountain lion, two bird nests, four stuffed birds, a horse carved of balsa wood, a dried sea horse, a starfish, and a fine collection of shells.

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"The horse is the work of Carlos," explained the teacher.

Doctor Gabriel took it up in his hands. "This is good work, Carlos. You should have some modeling clay."

Carlos shrugged. Where does one get modeling clay, he seemed to say. He glanced sideways at Mario. "Then I could model a shark," he said, raising innocent brown eyes in a straight face.

The class tittered, tried to subside, and then burst out laughing, to the surprise of the teacher and her guests.

"Where did you get these beautiful shells?" asked the American lady.

"Mario brings them in. He finds shells all along the beach."

"He finds sharks, too," said Carlos, under cover of of the questions.

Mario's lips were a thin, straight line of anger.

The American lady reached for a large white shell with shiny black tips poking out in all directions. "I have never seen anything like this." She turned to Mario. "Will you let me buy this shell, Mario? I will give you many *pesos* for it."

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Mario looked up with hot, angry eyes. "My shells are not for sale, *señorita*, if you please."

"Well—I suppose not. Well—I can't blame you for hanging on to something so very unusual. If you ever find another like it, send it to me in El Centro. Can you remember that? My name is Hattie Blake. El Centro. That's just across the Mexican border in Imperial Valley. I would give you a hundred *pesos* for a shell like that."

"A hundred *pesos!*" The words hissed around the room. It was a small fortune to most of these children. It was a large fortune to Mario, who had nothing. But he gritted his teeth and tightened his lips stubbornly.

The American woman walked over to his desk, and years of training dragged Mario to his feet. "I'll be hoping to hear from you," she boomed. She handed him a card with her name and address scribbled on it. "I'd love to have a shell like that."

Mario bowed, took the card, and slid back beside Carlos. His teeth were still clenched, his eyes stormy, as the doctor and Miss Hattie Blake walked to the door with the teacher.

Mario put the card in his pocket and the lessons

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went on. He braced himself for further teasing. To his surprise the class was silent, even Carlos. They were stunned by the offer of so much money for a single sea shell that any one of them, with luck, could have picked up on the beach. A hundred *pesos* was a lot of money. It was eight American dollars. This crazy woman was willing to pay that vast sum for a sea shell. Yesterday it had been a shark. Today it was a hundred *pesos*. It didn't make sense, but there it was. There was no accounting for Americans.

Mario did not realize that the shark business was no longer funny. He had smarted under the insults all day. When the bells rang, he was still angry. He kept the promise to himself and punched Carlos the minute they were outside the gate.

Carlos, taken by surprise, went down in a heap. "Hey!" he bellowed. "What's the matter with you?"

Mario knocked him down again.

"Psst! The teacher!"

Mario dusted his knuckles on his trousers and sauntered off down the street.

"Mario!" It was the teacher's voice.

Mario shrugged. He might have known. It was

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that kind of a day. He expected to be punished for fighting.

Instead, the teacher handed him a package wrapped in layers of cloth. "It is your black and white shell, Mario. I did not know it had so much value for a collector. You should keep it in a safe place, not loose on a school shelf. If you need money you can sell it to Miss Blake."

"*Gracias*," said Mario absently.

"Did you keep the lady's card?"

"*Sí, señora*, I have it."

"Hang on to it. El Centro is not so far away. Who knows? She will pay you a good price for your shell."

"*Sí, señora*," answered Mario, bored with the whole business. He went off down the road, swinging the little cloth bundle from a careless finger.

He whistled as he trudged through the dust. The day was not so bad after all. He had punched Carlos as he had promised himself. Thanks to the surprise, and the teacher's coming, he had got off with nothing in return. He had somehow lived down the shark business. He had been offered a hundred *pesos* for a single sea shell. He had refused this great sum. He was a fool. He knew that. But it was glorious to

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know that he could be a fool if he chose. He had been a fool to expect a fine *bonito* to pay for a shell. He was a bigger fool to turn down a hundred *pesos* for another one.

A hundred *pesos*. It would buy food of all kinds for La Vieja, tender, easy-to-chew foods that would give her strength, now that she was old and feeble. He had not thought of La Vieja when he so grandly spurned these riches.

Mario stopped in the middle of the road. It was not fair to La Vieja for Mario to please himself about this sea shell. He turned on his heel. He would go back to town and out to the Sportsman's Lodge. He would find the American lady and tell her that he would sell the shell. Then he would buy flour and canned fruit, tender meat and canned tomatoes. He would buy the whole store for La Vieja.

He started to run back through the town to the sea. A car came jolting toward him, and he veered to the side of the road as he ran. It drew up alongside.

"Mario!" It was Dr. Gabriel. He leaned out of the car. "Climb in, Mario. I am on my way to your house. The wife of the postmaster went out to see your

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grandmother and take her some food. She came to tell me that La Vieja is very sick."

Mario's heart almost stopped. La Vieja, the little grandmother who had loved him and scolded him, fed and clothed and watched over him all the days and nights since the dreadful time of the Big Storm. It was La Vieja who had done the most to keep him out of the orphanage.

"How sick?" he asked as the car went rackety-packing over the chuckholes.

"I can't tell until I see her. She is too sick to talk."

Mario remembered the shark, that black, evil creature with the malevolent eye leering at him. "Could it—was it the shark—is it poison—shark?"

"Not that I know of." Dr. Gabriel's voice was impatient. "Probably just old age. She's too old to be there in that hut, open to wind and weather. With only a boy to look out for her. At her age still making tortillas and milking goats."

"Will she die?" asked Mario.

"Not if I can help it," answered the doctor, "but I'm not sure I can."

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MARIO TAKES TO THE AIR

LA VIEJA was very sick. Even Mario could see that. The doctor knew it, too. As he examined

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her with gentle hands, La Vieja did not move or speak. Her face was ash-colored. Her old veined hands were hot as fire when Mario reached down to touch her.

The doctor rose from his knees and brushed the dust of the earthen floor from his trousers. He peered at Mario through the thick lenses that made his eyes look small and sharp. "She must go to a hospital," he said. "The hospital here is not ready. We will have to take her to Tijuana. Once before, when she was sick, I talked with your Aunt Lucita who lives there. She will take La Vieja after the hospital has made her well."

"And I, *Señor* Doctor?"

"You will go with us. Your aunt will be glad to have you to help her with La Vieja. Your grandmother will need someone to bring her back to Loreto. You are a big boy—how old, Mario? Eleven. That is big enough. You are the man of the family. You must make this decision."

"And if we stay here in Loreto?"

"La Vieja will die." The words were hard and harsh and clanged through the hut like a slow church bell ringing for the requiem Mass.

"Then we must go," said Mario.

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"*Bueno*—good!" The doctor picked up his bag. "Get her things together and your own. I must telephone for seats on the plane, a bed in the hospital at Tijuana, and your aunt."

It was a time of hurry and worry for Mario, as he gathered up their few possessions. He rolled those of La Vieja in a blanket. He tied his own in a cardboard box. It made him feel more like a traveler than a blanket bundle would have done.

That evening Mario trudged down the road to the next house to ask Domingo, the old man there, to feed and water the goats. "For the milk, *señor*? Negra, the black one, she will have a baby soon. Will you watch out for her?" There were tears in Mario's eyes. He brushed them away angrily. A man does not weep when he goes to do business.

"*Sí*," answered the old man. "I shall be glad to have goat's milk. Put all worry from your mind. Think only of the grandmother. All will be well with the house and the goats until your return."

"*Gracias, señor*."

"*De nada*. They tell me you are going to fly."

Mario nodded. "In the morning, on the plane, to Tijuana."

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"You are a brave boy. Me, I would be afraid to fly."

Up to that minute, Mario had not thought about flying. On the way home he looked up at the stars, so bright, so far away. Flung across the heavens in a careless pattern, standing still, yet changing through the night, through the seasons. What would it be like, flying in the sky?

The teacher said that men were getting ready to fly to the moon. Even now, man-made silver balls were circling the earth. If you flew in the sky, would you see them? Would they pass you in the heavens, like cars passing on the road to San Xavier?

Mario shuddered. His world had turned upside down. La Vieja, whose scolding and kindness had governed his world, was laid low, and he, Mario, must take to the air. He must have courage enough for two. He must be a man. Eleven was a big boy, the doctor had said. But eleven, Mario thought, was nowhere near being a man.

When the doctor came back to the hut, he was worried. "I have plane seats for us, and an ambulance to meet us. But I could not reach your aunt. We

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will have to call her when we arrive in Tijuana."

He and Mario took turns all night, dozing in the one chair. The doctor woke Mario at daylight. "You must watch La Vieja every minute. If she seems worse, give her this pill in a little water."

"Does she know where we are going?"

"No. And if you would save her life, say nothing. She has never been outside of Loreto. It would be enough to scare her into heaven. I must see my other patients before I leave, and talk with my nurses. I will come for you in plenty of time."

Mario was wide awake and afraid. Each labored breath from La Vieja made him ask himself, is she worse, should I give her this pill? How can I tell?

Old Domingo came early to milk. He left some milk in a brown bowl beside the door, but Mario forgot it. The time went slowly by.

The doctor came back later. In his hand was a rolled tortilla filled with cheese and hot sauce. "I bet you haven't had a bite to eat, Mario. Here, get this down, and some goat's milk. We'll get some sandwiches later on the plane."

At the last minute Mario picked up the cloth bundle that was wrapped around the black and

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white shell. He opened it and added a handful of shells from the heap in the corner. "I shall take them to my Aunt Lucita," he said aloud. "It is my only gift. The black and white shell has value."

The doctor scooped the frail old lady from her bed on the floor and carried her out to the car. "Bring the extra blanket, Mario. Wind her rosary around her fingers. It will comfort her if she wakes up."

"Can she live through this journey?" asked Mario fearfully. He wasn't at all sure he could himself.

"I don't know." The doctor sounded bone weary and worried. "She won't, if she stays here. At her age, everything is a gamble."

"La Vieja says she is as tough as a road runner," said Mario loyally.

"That's what I'm counting on. Sit in the back, Mario, and see that this road runner doesn't bounce off."

Mario sat on the floor, bracing himself to hold La Vieja steady.

At the plane the doctor carried her on board and settled her on a back seat, with pillows behind her head and under her knees. He took the seat in front of her.

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Mario sat across from them, his eyes as big as saucers, trying to take in everything on the plane at once. The engines roared. The plane was moving, bumping along the airstrip. Faster and faster, a quick turn that scattered pebbles and dust, a frantic run. Mario's heart lurched as he realized that he was looking down on automobiles, on people standing at the gate. He watched the cactus and mesquite trees grow smaller. He looked down on the old mission church, the mother church of all the California missions, where he went to school. Then suddenly the dark blue water of the Sea of Cortez, the Gulf, was glinting in the early sun. The plane was over the sea.

Mario's heart was pounding. Would the saints bring him and La Vieja back alive? He looked ahead to where the great silver wings stretched out on either side. They didn't flap like a bird's wings. They were still, steady, solid. What held them up?

For the first time in his life, Mario could see the whole length of Carmen Island, and blue sea beyond.

A pretty Mexican girl in a uniform stopped to ask

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the doctor if there was anything she could do for La Vieja.

"Not right now, thank you. If she wakes, I may need help."

She nodded. She offered Mario a box of gum.

"No, thank you, *señorita,*" he said shyly. "I have no money."

"It's free!" Her voice was full of laughter. She tucked two pieces of gum in his jacket pocket.

Mario was amazed. Gum to give away free! He patted his pocket to see if the treasure was still there. He watched the sea and the islands along the coast, and the mountains, until he was lulled into a short nap. When he woke, La Vieja was stirring and moaning. "Is she worse?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't think so. She has less fever. But there is a new worry."

"What is it, *Señor* Doctor?"

"We've changed our course. We didn't stop at Santa Rosalía as usual. We are no longer flying north. Now we are going east, over the Gulf."

"What does that mean for us, *señor?*"

"I don't know." The doctor rubbed the side of his

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nose, frowning. "It looks like that ambulance at Tijuana is going to have a long wait."

The Mexican stewardess was moving slowly down the aisle. Her face was calm and there was a smile in her eyes. Behind her she left confusion, loud voices, angry questions.

When she reached them, she spoke quietly to the doctor. "We are going to Guaymas, in Mexico, *señores*," she told them.

"But why?" demanded the doctor. "This is a matter of life and death——" he waved his hand at the old grandmother.

"*Sí*. I understand. But there is too much wind below, *señor*. We could not land at Santa Rosalía because of this wind."

The doctor looked down at the calm blue water below. "Wind, nothing——" he began.

She lowered one eye slowly and touched her lips with a rosy fingernail.

"I see," said Doctor Gabriel. He turned to Mario. "We will land in Guaymas, in Mexico, Mario."

Mario watched the blue water below. The plane was close enough so that he could see the waves.

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The passengers still buzzed with questions. A sudden thought struck him.

"Is there something wrong with the plane, *señor*?" He was surprised at the squeak in his own voice.

Doctor Gabriel turned around to look at Mario. He grinned but his eyes behind the thick lenses looked concerned. Before he spoke he smoothed his mustache. "Yes. I think there is something wrong. I don't know what. I'm not going to ask. If that stewardess can smile her way through it, we can, too. These pilots know their business. If they think it is safer to land us in Guaymas, I'm thankful it isn't very far off."

"But what about the hospital at Tijuana?"

Doctor Gabriel pressed his lips together as he looked down at the quiet little bundle that was Mario's grandmother. "La Vieja is standing the trip much better than I expected. There is a hospital at Guaymas. If it looks like too long a wait to mend the plane, I'll take her there."

"And I, *señor*?"

"We shall worry about that when the time comes."

Mario clutched his little bundle of shells and

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stared down at the water coming closer and closer. His hands were cold and clammy. When he was sure they were going to crash, he looked up to see the doctor grinning at him.

"You can stop worrying, Mario. Relax! We are coming in."

Houses and islands swept past below them. The plane circled above rocky hills, gliding down until the wheels bounced on the earth, rose and bounced down again, as it taxied toward a small building.

La Vieja woke up as the engines slowed. "Mario!" she croaked. "*Madre de Dios!* Where am I?"

Before Doctor Gabriel could stop him, Mario had blurted out, "We are in Guaymas. In Mexico."

The old woman struggled to sit up.

"There! There! *señora,*" soothed Doctor Gabriel.

The old lady collapsed into her pillows, her face screwed up like a child about to cry. She clutched her rosary to her lips.

"Everybody must leave the plane," said the hostess, but she shook her head at Dr. Gabriel and Mario.

"May I telephone for an ambulance?" asked Doctor Gabriel, his voice tense.

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"I will place the call for you, Doctor, as soon as my passengers are off the plane."

"I can't wait for that," he answered. "Stay here, Mario, until I return.

He pushed by the people moving slowly off the plane. Mario could see him running over to the airport.

Mario eyed La Vieja as the passengers pushed by, but she seemed asleep.

Doctor Gabriel came back in a few minutes. "The ambulance will be here shortly. Now we must do some quick planning. I will get La Vieja to the hospital and see her settled there. Then I must get back to Loreto. There is no place here for you to stay, Mario. It would cost too much. I think it is best for you to go on to Tijuana to stay with your aunt. I will come back here or send someone to take La Vieja to Tijuana as soon as she is well enough. I couldn't get through to Tijuana to let your aunt know."

"Will Tía Lucita meet me there?" Mario felt that his whole world was crashing about his ears.

"I think so. I hope so. I will call her, or have the hospital call her until they reach her. If we cannot

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reach her, you must call this number until you do." Doctor Gabriel wrote on a card.

"Where do I stand when I call out this number?"

Doctor Gabriel stared at Mario. "*Madre de Dios!* Haven't you ever used a telephone?"

"No, *señor*. I have seen one in the airplane office. I have heard the bell ring. I have seen people talk into a little black flower in front of a box."

The doctor held his head in his hands. He straightened up. "Mario, listen very carefully. I will write a letter. You are to give it to one of the airport people in Tijuana. They will take care of you. Here is your aunt's name and address. Under it is her telephone number. Give it to one of the guards with the letter I am writing. I am telling them about you and about the ambulance."

"Can't I stay here in Guaymas to watch out for La Vieja? *Por favor?*"

"I don't know where. La Vieja will have good care in the hospital. You need to be some place with relatives."

"Let me go home to Loreto." Mario's voice was desperate. "Can't I look out for myself, and the goats? Until La Vieja can come?"

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Doctor Gabriel shook his head. "No. The town would never stand for it. They have been saying all along you should go to the orphanage in La Paz. This would settle it."

"Oh! *Señor!*"

"I know. It's a tough spot. In my small government quarters I have no room. Look, Mario! Get to your Aunt Lucita. Blood's thicker than water. She is willing to help, and she is kind and good, like La Vieja. Stay there until the grandma is ready to come home. Okay?"

"What if La Vieja doesn't get well?" Mario's voice was choked with tears.

"I will get well," said a cracked voice behind them.

Mario turned and stared down at La Vieja. Her black eyes twinkled back at him from her nest of pillows. "Have no fears, my son." Her face wrinkled up in a wintry smile. She ran her tongue over her cracked lips. She closed her eyes. *"Vaya con Dios.* Go with God."

A long glittering ambulance was backing up to the airplane steps.

"Here's the letter, Mario. Stay on the plane until

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you get to Tijuana. Here's some money. I will call Tía Lucita as soon as I reach the hospital." He turned to La Vieja. "Come, then, *señora*. Here are the ambulance men to help me get you off the plane."

Mario watched the ambulance wheel around and drive off down the road into Guaymas. With it went the last two people who belonged to the world he knew.

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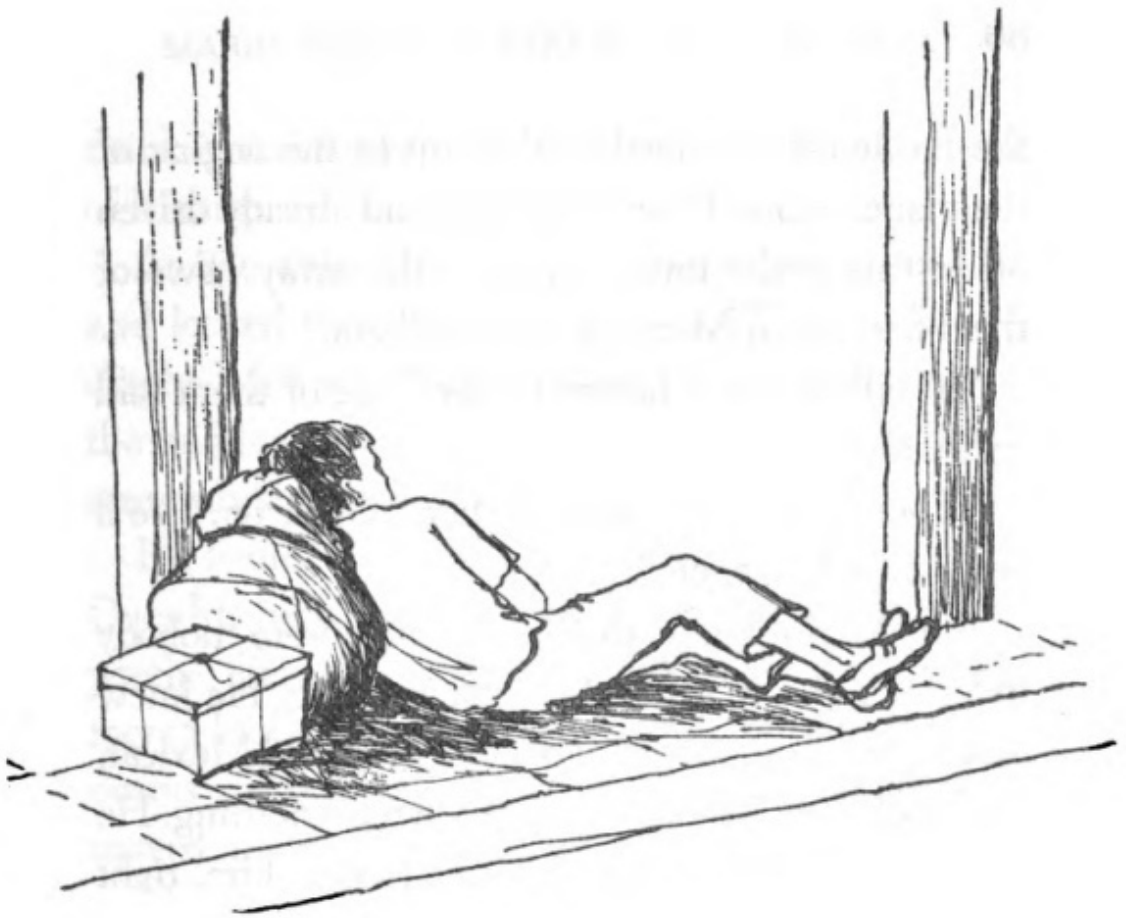

MARIO MEETS A STRANGER AT TIJUANA

MARIO sat on the steps of the Guaymas airport, in the shade of the small porch. He could hear the airport people talking inside the small room. Typewriters clicked. A telephone bell jangled.

Outside, the sun beat down on the airstrip, while

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the mechanics climbed ladders up to the engine of the plane. Most of the passengers had already driven off in cars to the town, several miles away. Two of them had urged Mario to go with them.

"It will be hours before we fly," one of them said in Spanish.

"There's no food," said another. "Come on. We'll get you back in time."

But Mario knew that even in Loreto nobody rode for miles in a hired car for nothing. He knew that no one, certainly not an eleven-year-old Mexican boy, could buy food in a strange town for nothing. He had the money Doctor Gabriel had given him, tight in his pocket. But he would need it at Tijuana. It was not wise to spend what you had just for a trip into town. Money in the pocket was a good thing. It made eleven seem nearer to being a man.

"*Gracias, señores,* but I will stay here," he said politely.

The cars had driven away, full of chattering passengers. Most of them were Americans who had been visiting in Baja California. They had stopped fussing about the change of plans. They seemed to

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think it was a good joke to be over on the mainland of Mexico.

At one o'clock the men of the airport came out and locked the door behind them. The mechanics climbed down the ladder. It was *siesta* time, time for the midday nap. Mario felt that all people of good sense understood about that.

He leaned his head against the pole by the steps. Over his head, under the palm-thatched roof of the porch, flies circled and buzzed. The plane shimmered in the sun. Heat waves rose from the gasoline drums stacked up beyond. In the sky two buzzards moved in lazy flight.

Mario closed his eyes. He sent a prayer of thanks for their safe arrival and a plea for help for La Vieja and himself. He had had little sleep the night before. He had been up since long before dawn. It was wiser to sleep, he thought, than to stay awake and worry.

Two hours later the mechanics and airport people returned. The passengers drove back, loaded down with gay baskets packed full of things they had bought in the stores of Guaymas.

One of the Mexican men brought back to Mario

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a thick sandwich, filled with lettuce and pink slices of ham. Mario thought he had never tasted anything so good. Afterward he chewed one of the gum lozenges from his pocket. Between the sleep and food and the sweet minty gum, he felt like a new man. He regretted that the gum would not blow bubbles, but one couldn't have everything.

It was late in the afternoon when the hostess came to tell them the plane was ready to fly.

"How can we be sure she'll stay up?" asked someone in Spanish.

"We would not take off if not, *señor*," she answered with a smile.

She is not afraid, Mario told himself. I, too, I am not afraid.

But he felt small and lonely as he climbed up the steep steps into the dim cavern of the plane, alone.

The airplane flew over the Gulf, then across high, rocky mountains that were splotched with color in the late sunshine. They looked barren and dry, with no sign of life. But they were like the mountains around Loreto and seemed friendly to Mario. Who knew what he would find at Tijuana?

He ate the sandwiches the hostess brought him on

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a small tray. With them she brought him a paper cup of some cold, brown liquid that bubbled in his face and stung his nose when he drank it. It washed down the dry sandwiches and he was sorry when it was gone.

"Fasten your seat belts, please."

Mario fumbled with the belt. The doctor had done it for him before. The hostess came to show him how it worked.

The last of a flaming sunset had died out over the Pacific Ocean. It was nearly night when they came down over Tijuana. Now a thousand lights were winking and gleaming on the hills below.

Mario had thought of Tijuana as a town only a little bigger than Loreto. A few more adobe buildings, perhaps. A larger church. His heart was a knot in his chest as he looked down on the big sprawling city flung across a dozen hills. How could he find an aunt he had never seen before in this big place? How could she find one small boy from Loreto?

The plane bucked and bumped over deep arroyos and swooped down to bounce gently along an airstrip, up to a brightly lighted building.

The hostess came to help him unfasten his seat

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belt. She handed him his roped cardboard box. "There now! Off you go. Somebody meeting you?"

"*Sí, señorita, muchas gracias,*" said Mario, hoping with all his heart that it was true.

The passengers walked through a door and into a room lined with desks and counters. It was a huge building, thought Mario, just for people to walk through.

"Here, you!" A big man stopped Mario. "Baggage inspection."

"*Qué cosa, señor?*" asked Mario. "What is it, *señor?*"

"I have to open your box."

Mario watched him untie the ropes. All along a low table suitcases were being opened while men in uniform examined the contents.

"All you have?" asked the man.

"*Sí, señor*. Can you tell me—*por favor*——"

"Tie it up, *muchacho*, and move along."

Mario folded his few belongings back in the battered cardboard box and tied it up again. He carried it with him into the middle of the big room.

He looked around but he could not see anyone who might be his aunt. Every woman seemed to

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know where she was going or to be with someone else. Not one of them looked as though she were trying to find a tired eleven-year-old from Loreto.

Maybe my aunt waits outside, he thought. She is looking for a doctor and a sick grandmother. Perhaps she waits by the ambulance.

That reminded him of the letter in his pocket. He took it out and went up to a man at a desk. "*Por favor, señor,*" he began.

"You want insurance? Give me your money and sign here."

"No, *señor*. I want nothing that costs money."

The man gave a sharp sound of laughter. "Then you've come to the wrong place, Little One. Tijuana has more ways to cost you money than a mesquite has thorns."

"Will you read this letter and tell me what to do, *señor?*" asked Mario.

The man pushed back the letter. "There's a post-box over by the door. Stamps at the counter." He turned to a man who had come up. "*Buenas noches, señor*. Insurance?"

Mario turned away. He walked over to a man who

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was squinting down at some figures on a paper. *"Por favor—señor——"*

"Un momento—one moment. Sixty-five, seventy-two, seventy-six, ninety-three. Whew! That's done. Now I can go home. You want a ticket for tomorrow?"

"No, *señor*. I must find my aunt."

"When did you see her last?" The man squinted at Mario, blinked his eyes, and put the last of his papers in a drawer.

"I have never seen my aunt. She was to meet me here."

"She'll turn up. Big traffic jam in town. Hot jai alai game. I got my money on Pablo."

"Could you read this letter, *señor*?"

"Certainly, my son. Did you think I could not read? M—m—m—mmmmm. That ambulance went back at noon. No, nobody's left a message. I'll ask in the office."

"Gracias, señor."

"De nada. Stay here. I'll be back. This your aunt's name and number?"

"Sí, señor."

"You stay right here. I'll call her."

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Mario leaned on the counter, his cardboard box at his feet, still clutching his little bundle of shells. He felt better than he had since he had watched the ambulance drive away from the plane down the road to Guaymas.

The man with the blinking eyes walked off, the letter in his hand. When he came back he was shaking his head. "No message. And I called this number three times. No answer. She's probably on the way out here. Met the plane this morning, I bet. Now she's gone home to get dinner." He dug in his pocket and drew out a chocolate bar. "Here. This will keep you busy while you wait." He grinned and added in English, "Live it up!" He squinted at Mario, patted him awkwardly on the shoulder, and turned to go.

Mario put the letter back in his pocket. "*Muchas gracias, señor.*"

"*De nada.* Stay here in the light, where she can see you. I have to run if I want to get to the game. She'll turn up."

Mario felt lonelier than ever when the little man trotted off. When the man had plunged out of the big door, Mario peeled off the covering of the chocolate bar. He nibbled at the candy as slowly as he

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could to make its delicious sweetness last as long as possible.

The crowds thinned out. Many of the people behind the counters went off. As the lights of cars came swinging up the road from the city below, Mario's heart would be sure that each one would be bringing Tía Lucita. But no one asked for a small boy from Loreto.

The big clock on the wall ticked slowly on. Mario's heart sank down to his shoes. When it grew very late, and it had been a long time since a car had driven up, Mario walked over to an empty bench and sat down.

A man came by, shrugging into a coat. He stopped in front of Mario. "Waiting for someone?" he asked.

"*Sí, señor.*" Mario jumped to his feet. "I am waiting for my aunt, Tía Lucita. She was to meet the plane at ten o'clock this morning. Now it is past ten o'clock at night." He stopped, trying to still the trembling of his lips.

"Well, you can't stay here all night. I am driving in to town. I'll take you, if you like. You can ask for her there."

"If it is too much trouble, *señor*, I can walk."

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The man laughed. "That's a long walk. Come along. We'll telephone when we get to town."

Mario picked up his box and followed the man outside.

The man unlocked his parked car.

"You are very kind, *señor*," said Mario.

"*De nada*. It's tough to arrive some place and find no one there to meet you. Did you come from La Paz?"

"No, *señor*, from Loreto."

"Ah! Loreto! It is beautiful, no?"

Mario's heart warmed at this praise of his birthplace.

They seemed fairly to fly, so great was the speed with which they plunged down the steep road. Mario felt that surely no car was built to go at that speed.

When the man went into a box, not much taller than he was, to call Aunt Lucita's house, there was no answer. "They aren't there, that's sure. I'll leave you off here now. No use you getting mixed up in the jai alai crowds. You try the phone a little later. If you can't get your aunt, you better find a hotel. There are

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a couple down the street here. Not too bad. Not too expensive."

Mario thanked him. He didn't want to tell this stranger that he didn't know how to use the telephone. He didn't want to say he didn't have enough money for a hotel. He sat down on the curb and waited until the man had driven away. He picked up his bundles and walked down the street.

There were lights overhead, and lights in all the store windows. These were filled with more things than Mario had ever known there were in the whole world. He came to a small park.

In the moonlight he could see a bandstand with benches in front of it. This would be a good place to sleep. It would cost no money. He did not mind sleeping out in the open. After all there were cracks aplenty between the reeds of La Vieja's hut. There was not much to choose between her earthen floor and a wooden bench.

He went into the middle of all the benches, so that the lights from passing cars would not shine in his eyes. Many people walked along the sidewalks around the park, under the trees, but he did not

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think they would notice a small boy asleep on a bench.

He took some of the clothes out of his box and rolled them into a bundle to tuck beneath his head. He took off his jacket and draped it over him for a blanket.

He woke in the early morning, stiff and sore, and very hungry. The birds in the trees were singing the sun up. It was cold and Mario brought his knees up to his chin, his back to the back of the bench. He tucked his jacket around every corner, but the little gusts of cold wind found the uncovered spots. He could not sleep for shivering.

He sat up and put the jacket on. He packed the clothes back in the box and picked up his bundle of shells.

It was then that Mario saw that he was not alone in the park. On another bench not far away sat a small man with black sideburns down his cheeks and a pencil-thin mustache. He was peeling an orange.

When he saw Mario looking at him, he looked away. His eyes were mere slits as he watched a scrawny cat walk across the open space in front of

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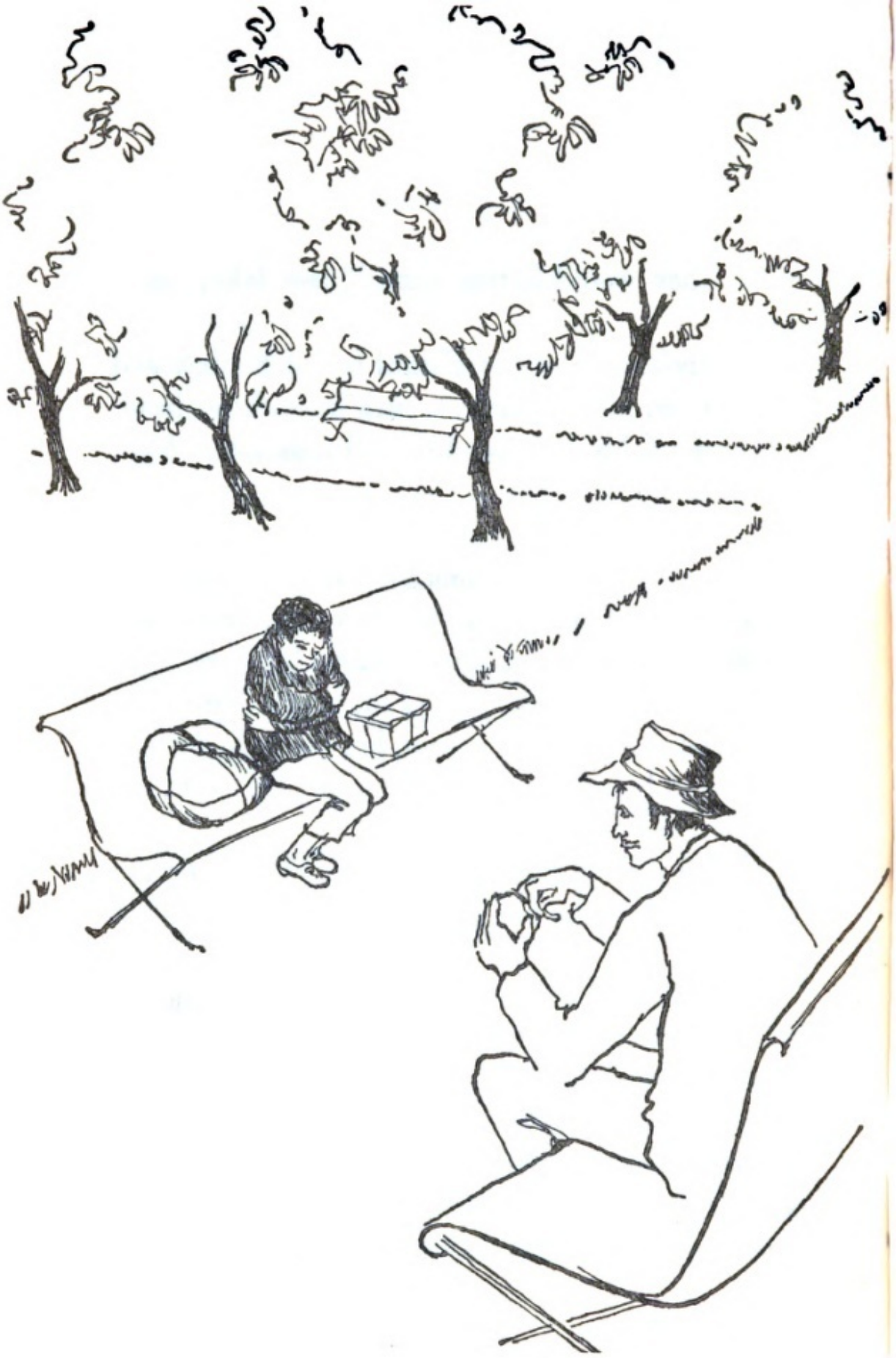

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the bandstand. He watched a woman with a basket on her head walk by under the jacaranda trees. He put a section of orange in his mouth and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Then he looked back at Mario.

"Hi! *Amigo!*" he said.

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TOO FAR TO GET BACK

THE MAN walked over to the bench and Mario moved over to make more room. *"Buenos días, señor,"* said Mario gravely.

The man broke off half of the orange. "A bite?"

The orange was gone in one gulp.

"Hungry, eh? What's your name?"

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Mario told him.

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a tight roll of cooked tortillas. He peeled several of the round, thin cakes off the roll and handed them to Mario. "You have no place to go."

It was not exactly a question, but Mario answered it. "I must find my aunt who lives here in Tijuana. It was too late last night when the plane came in to know where to look for her."

"Does she live around here, or up in the hills?"

Mario chewed on the leathery tortilla. It was cold and tough, not at all like the tender tortillas La Vieja made. But it was food, and Mario was as hungry as the buzzards in the palm trees before the fish came in on the boats.

"I do not know, *señor*," he answered. "I have her address and the number to talk to on the telephone." He spread his hands and raised his shoulders. "But I do not know how to talk to a telephone."

With easy questions, the man got from Mario the whole story. About La Vieja and the doctor, about the trip to Guaymas in the wounded plane, about the ambulance and the lonely journey to Tijuana.

The man was all sympathy. "Tell you what, my

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friend. You come with me while I get a cup of coffee. You drink coffee?"

"I drink goat's milk, *señor*."

"No goats. You come and have a hot cup of coffee, *con leche*, with milk, eh? Then I will phone your aunt. And call me Felipe, eh?"

Mario was not sure he wanted to go with this little man. Just why this was so he could not have said. This man was not like anyone Mario had known in Loreto. He was not like the friendly people he had met since he had started on this journey. But if this man would telephone to Aunt Lucita, wasn't that a kind thing?

"You ever pick cotton, Mario?"

"No, *señor*. We do not grow cotton where I live."

"Too bad. There's lots of cotton to be picked right now. You could earn good money. Lots of kids do. You got any money?"

"Not very much, *señor*."

"What you got in the box?"

"A few clothes."

"And in that bundle?"

"These are shells, *señor*. From the beach where I live." A wave of homesickness swept over Mario for

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the safety of the dusty streets, the blue waters, and the long curving beach of Loreto.

"You hauled shells all the way up here? A bunch of shells?"

Mario wanted to say, one of these shells is worth a hundred pesos, *señor*, but something warned him not to say it. "They are a present for my aunt. They will remind her of when she was a little girl in Loreto."

"Shells!" Felipe shrugged. "A good thing we don't all like the same thing, huh?" He stopped. "Here we are." He slid onto a stool in front of a counter. "Two cups of coffee, and a sweet roll, *por favor*."

Mario liked the hot sugared coffee, and his half of the sweet roll was full of delicious goodness. With pride he drew some money from his pocket and paid for the breakfast. "And here is money for the telephone, *señor*." He could not bring himself to call the man "Felipe." "Here is the number of my aunt."

Felipe took the slip of paper and went off to a box at the end of the room. Mario could hear him talking to someone. Surely it was Aunt Lucita.

But Felipe came back shaking his head. "I couldn't get your aunt. Somebody answered. They

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said she has gone across the border to the U.S.A. on a visit."

"For how long?"

"*Quién sabe?* Who knows? They gave me her address. She went to the Imperial Valley. To El Centro. You know El Centro?"

Mario shook his head. The only time he had even heard of a place called El Centro the American woman had mentioned it. He set the thick coffee cup down on the counter. He needed both hands to hold his head while he thought about this latest trouble.

Felipe sat beside him, looking at him out of the corner of his eye. He leaned closer and spoke into Mario's ear. "I can get you across into that Imperial Valley, and it won't cost you a *centavo*."

Mario looked up at him, his eyes sick with worry. "How much does it cost to cross the border?"

"Regular? Plenty. You have to have papers. You have to have a vaccination——"

"I have a vaccination." Doctor Gabriel had seen to that.

"You're lucky. Most of the ones who want to go across never heard of it. It costs plenty besides.

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Everybody takes money for every little thing. Time you're through, it's twenty-five bucks, maybe."

"How much is a buck?"

"A dollar. And a dollar is twelve pesos. Twelve times twenty-five—you got that much?"

In his whole life Mario had never had that much. "You say that you can get me across—how do you do this, *señor*?"

"Keep your voice down! You want to tell the world?"

"No, *señor*, only——"

"Only shut up, see?" Felipe put his elbow on the counter and leaned close. His voice was smooth and low. "It's simple. There are miles and miles, hundreds of miles of border. They can't guard all of it. You don't have to go across where the patrols are. Up in the mountains you climb a fence. There's a truck meets us on the other side."

"Don't they care?"

"The Border Patrol? No. They figure on a certain number getting across. They let them stay long enough to get the melons or the lettuce or the cotton picked. Then they round up all the wetbacks and ship them back to Mexico."

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"Wetbacks?"

"The ones without papers. In some places the border's a river, and they swim across. They call them wetbacks because their clothes are still wet when the trucks pick them up. You can find your aunt easy in El Centro. She'll take you back home with her."

Mario thought about this. He was afraid to go to America. How could he find his way around when he knew so little of their language? How could he explain if they asked him about papers? But if Aunt Lucita was there and wanted him to come? She could tell them. I am the man of the family, he told himself. I must make decisions. Mario did not know where to find someone else to help him.

He was afraid to go to the Tijuana police. When they found that he was homeless, with no relatives, no friend to take him in, they would send him to La Paz, to the orphanage. Sebastian had said it was barred, like a jail. Perhaps there was an orphanage here in Tijuana, where homeless boys could be sent. At the thought of the orphanage that was like a jail, Mario's mind was made up.

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"You want to go find your aunt?" asked Felipe.
"I will go with you, *señor*."
Felipe became brisk. "*Bueno*. We better get going. I got a truckload to pick up."

"Where is my paper, *señor*, with my aunt's number, *por favor*? I will need it when I come back to Tijuana."

Felipe fumbled in his pocket. "Now what did I do with it? Maybe you want to call her later, eh?"

"I do not know how to call the number."

This satisfied Felipe and he went off to find the paper. "Here you are. You won't need it across the border. Different numbers over there."

Mario felt safer with the paper in his pocket.

They spent several hours driving around Tijuana in a high-sided truck. Felipe picked up a number of men at different places. All of them sat on the floor of the truck, and most of them fell asleep as soon as they had pushed their way into it.

No one paid any attention to Mario. He sat in the cab of the truck with Felipe. At noon Felipe brought Mario a cold bottle of the brown drink that tickled his nose and a thick meat sandwich. He charged Mario six pesos for this food.

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They left Tijuana in the middle of the afternoon. The truck was bulging with the load of men, their suitcases and bundles. The last man, smelling of tobacco and garlic and beer, had climbed into the cab beside Mario.

Mario thought he was too worried to sleep. He was not sure he had done a wise thing, coming with Felipe. He was not sure that Doctor Gabriel would like what he had done. What if Tía Lucita had left this place, this El Centro, to return to Tijuana? How could he get back across the border? He did not have twenty-five bucks to cross a border. He felt like a chip swirling on the sea water that had surged through Loreto at the time of the Big Wind.

It was hot in the car. The road was smooth. Mario fell asleep.

He dreamed that La Vieja's house was burning. All about him were flames and choking smoke. He was trying to get through to find her, but wherever he felt he found nothing. When he awoke, the car was lurching and bumping over a rough road. The big man beside him was lighting a cigarette, puffing the smoke over Mario's head.

There was a heavy clunk as the truck scraped

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against a rock. Felipe stopped the car. Everybody poured out of the truck, glad to stretch cramped legs.

"That was a close one!" moaned Felipe.

"This road! It is like leaping from rock to rock. Must we travel such a goat track?" demanded the man from the front seat.

Felipe mopped his face with a bandanna. "Would you have a paved road, José, to lead the Border Patrol to our way out of Mexico? They would like nothing better than to find out where we come and go."

They all climbed in again. The truck took up its painful journey over the ruts and bumps, creaking and groaning. The men were awake now. Mario could hear them talking and quarreling.

The road wound up and up through the hills. They battered and banged their way around curves and over boulders. Sometimes the road led between piles of rocks, or steep, colored cliffs that looked as though they might crumble at any moment. Surely, thought Mario, this is a country forgotten by God.

By the time the sun was setting, they had driven into a camping spot. A circle of oaks and shrubs, at

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the foot of a high rocky cliff, made a natural hide-out. A tiny, smokeless fire burned on a built-up pile of rocks. A coffee pot had been pulled away from the heat and stood at a tilt behind a pot of bubbling beans. The ground had been swept as clean as a floor, with a broom of twigs that Mario could see leaning against a tree. The earth had been sprinkled with water, so that it was cool and fresh. Chairs were up-ended fruit boxes. Close under the cliff there was a screened box with water dripping down the sides through gunny sacks hung from a shallow pan of water.

An old Mexican woman was slapping tortillas between her hands, pulling the thin rounds like stretched rubber, patting them on the back of her wrists. Mario's heart gave a lurch and he swallowed hard. She was bent and wrinkled and old. She was so like La Vieja in the dusk beneath the trees that his breath caught in his throat.

La Vieja! Except for his dream where he could not reach her, he had not thought of his grand-mother all day. Doctor Gabriel had said she would have good care. Soon she would be well again. Soon

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they would go back to Loreto. He remembered her last words, "Go with God."

La Vieja had stood between him and the orphanage. She had fed him and scolded him and knelt beside him in the old Loreto church, praying for the two of them. Was she praying for him now? He needed her prayers more now, he was thinking, than he ever had before.

Mario felt that he was getting farther and farther from Loreto, and the world he knew, with each passing hour. He could not go back to Tijuana now, even if he knew the way. Without food and water no one could walk far in this barren land. Even the *padres*, like Fra Junipera Serra, the great walker, had been forced to travel back and forth across Baja California, from the Gulf to the Pacific and back again, following the ancient Indian trails that led to water. There was no water on this steep road into the mountains until they had come to this spot. Mario had come too far now to get back again.

"We will eat here," said Felipe gruffly. "We start walking in an hour."

The old woman lifted the big pot of beans from the stove. She set it down on an upturned box.

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When it had cooled a little, she brought from the stove a brown earthenware platter piled high with tortillas.

They all crowded around. Each one of them made a tight roll of a tortilla and dipped it in the hot beans, chewing beans and tortilla until the roll was gone. The beans were hot as fire.

Mario was so hungry he ate nine rolled tortillas, dripping with beans and hot sauce, as fast as he could chew them down. He was still hungry when the last of the tortillas was scooped out of the brown dish.

"Let's go!" said Felipe. "Plenty miles between here and the fence."

"And we sleep—where?" demanded José.

Felipe gave a short bark of laughter. "In the U.S.A., my friend. In the Canyon of the Lost Ones —*Los Perdidos!*"

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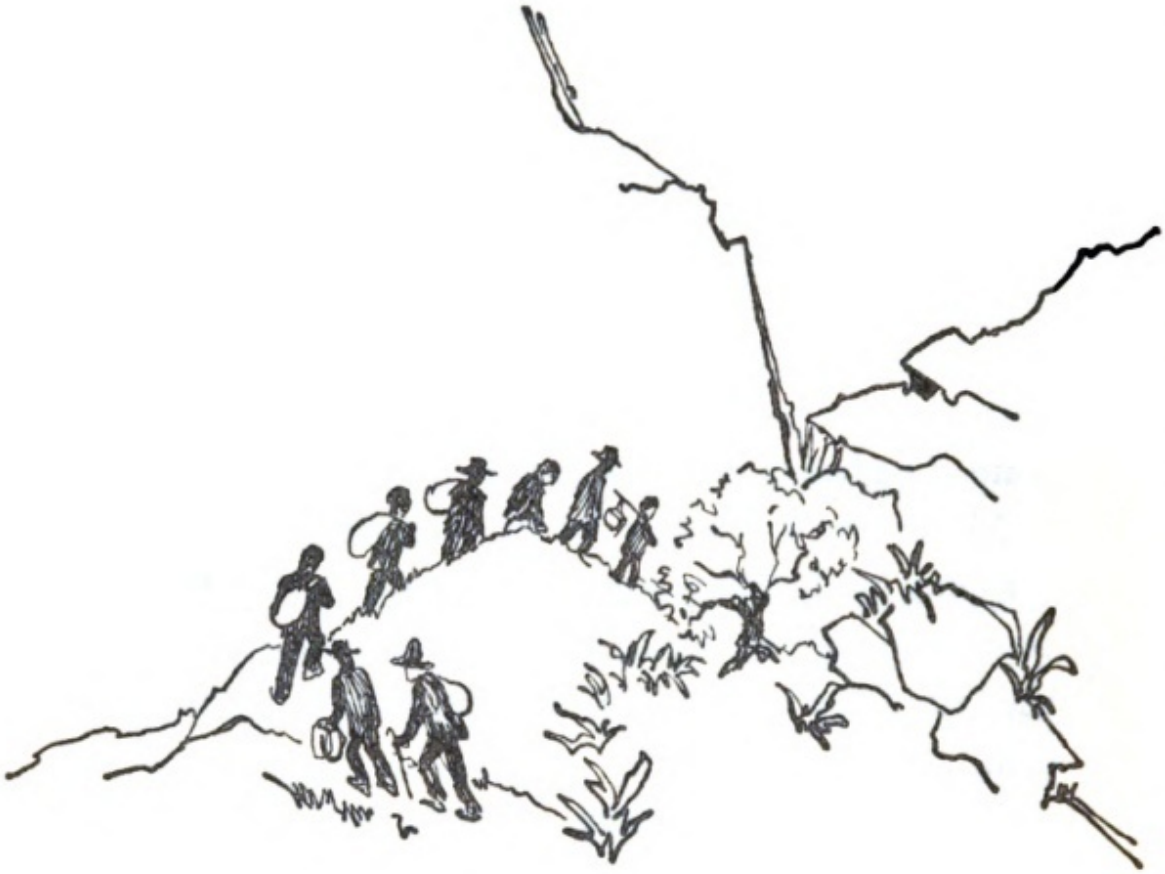

OVER THE FENCE

THE LOST Ones! It was a good name, Mario was thinking, for a place to cross the border with no papers. He felt lost himself. He did not know where he was going. He could not go back where he had been. He was truly one of the Lost Ones.

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Felipe dumped the suitcases and bundles out on the ground and each man picked up his own. He ran the truck up under the oak trees and Mario could see that the car was well hidden from both the air and the road. Felipe lined up the men, his pudgy hand tight on Mario's shoulder.

"Follow me, *amigos*. You first, Mario. You, José, you have been here before, you last. The rest any way you like. If you can't keep up, it's too bad. Nobody's going to wait. If we hear a plane, fall flat on your face. You got it?"

They grunted. In the gloom it was hard to see the nodding heads.

"How far to the fence?" asked one man.

"Never measured it," answered Felipe. "We walk until we get there. If I need to send word down the line, you come up close and quiet. Pick up your big feet. Don't roll any rocks."

"It'll be dark in half an hour," complained one of the men.

"*Bueno!* Good! Dark is a good thing for us. There's star shine. No cliffs or swamps. We go straight up a canyon, sandy at first, rocky up where it gets steep."

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"What about snakes. Any rattlers in here?"

"Under every rock. But I'll hear them before you do. Cut yourself a stick if you feel better. Talk low if you like. It will scare them into the bush."

"Maybe somebody else hears this talk."

"If they're that close, it's too late."

Mario broke off a long branch from a bush, stripping off the leaves. He knew how easy it was to kill a rattlesnake. He tied the small bundle of shells to his belt and twisted a stout stick through the rope around his box for a handle.

They set off single file up a road of sorts. This soon became a sandy wash between high walls, and later a rough climb over boulders.

Mario was used to walking long distances. He who has no car, no horse, must walk. But the sand of Loreto was smooth and hard packed. The sand in this arroyo was loose, with half-buried rocks to stub a toe and fall headlong.

They came to the fence sooner than he expected. Suddenly there it was, silver in the moonlight, with the wicked barbs at the top, set close.

Mario watched while Felipe draped coats and leather jackets over the barbed wire and then held

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the coats tight to the wire while the men climbed over. Mario was the last and he held down the coats for Felipe. He felt a tingle of fear as he turned away from the barrier. The land looked the same. The trees and the brush were the same on both sides. But this side of the fence was the U.S.A., the United States of America.

I am in a foreign country, Mario was thinking. This is a strange land where the language and customs are different from mine. I have come here against the law. I am not welcome in this land. I am a wetback.

The very air seemed strange, full of hidden danger. If he had known of any way to get back to Tijuana, to Loreto, he would have turned and fled back over this high fence, to the friendliness of his own land, his own people. He had come too far to turn back.

Within half a mile they came into another canyon, this one with a running stream. The rocky cliffs were high above them. Beside the stream stood a towering oak tree, with branches that spread from side to side of the rocky gorge. It was a mammoth tree. Eight men holding hands, it would take,

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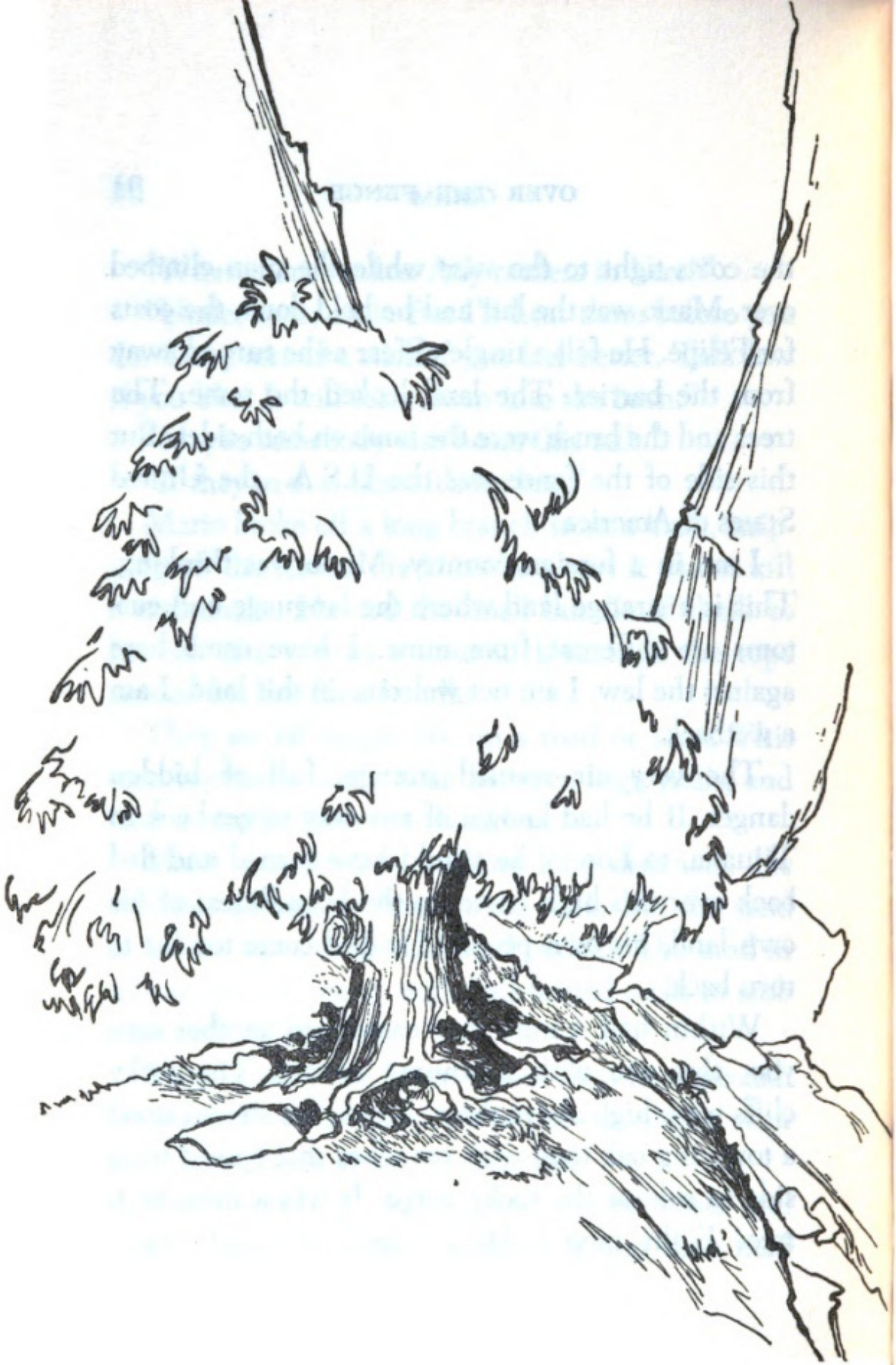

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thought Mario, to reach around its huge black trunk in a circle.

"We sleep here," said Felipe, "for four hours."

There were grunts and growls from the others. "Where's the truck?" one of them demanded.

"You think we bring it here, to the fence, my friend? You think we are crazy? We have two more fences to cross yet, on either side of the railroad tracks. Can a truck fly over locked fences? These are summer homes in here, homes of the rich. A truck driving in here, this time of year, would be spotted quick enough. The truck is well hidden down the road. It is not easy to hide a truck with eyes from the skies watching the border roads."

Mario could not sleep. When he closed his eyes he could see the long road back to Tijuana. When he opened them he could see the night sky with the same stars that were shining over the hospital at Guaymas, over Loreto. It was easier to stay awake.

Felipe got them up in a few hours. They set off across a bridge and along a well-graded road. There was a half-moon shining in the western sky.

Mario was half asleep as he stumbled along after Felipe. It was shivering cold. They climbed a fence

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and crossed two shining rails, which seemed to disappear as they melted together in the distance. Mario knew from his teacher's talk that these rails must be for a train. Mario had never seen a train. He would have liked to sit beside these shining rails and wait to see a train.

Felipe hurried them across the tracks and over the second fence. Half a mile beyond, Mario saw a canvas-covered truck under a tree beside the road. A man waited, sitting on the ground beside a pile of cardboard cartons.

Felipe lined up the tired men and counted them off. As he called off each man's name, that man climbed into the truck with his suitcase or bundle. Felipe handed the truck driver a roll of money. The man counted it slowly, licking his finger as he peeled each bill off the roll.

"How about the boy?" he asked.

Felipe drew him aside and they talked in low voices. The truck driver laughed and Felipe clapped him on the back. "Hop in, Mario. He'll take you to El Centro to find your aunt."

Mario climbed into the truck. The bed of the truck was lined along the sides and front with car-

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tons like those on the ground. The small space on the floor was packed with men and boxes, bundles and canteens, packed as tight as a box on a fishing boat after a good catch. He moved himself and his box over as far as he could to make room for Felipe.

Felipe had turned to help the driver load the boxes on the ground into the back of the truck. They left off a row of boxes at the top for an air space. Felipe climbed up to fasten down the canvas. In the dim light from the moon, Mario could see his pudgy face looking down at them.

"*Adiós, amigos,*" said Felipe. "Good luck in the fields. You will be filthy rich when you get back home." He waved a fat hand and laughed. "Keep your heads down or you will be back in Mexico sooner than you wish."

He pinned down the last of the canvas and was gone. The engine started up. The truck backed and turned. The engine began to purr.

Mario braced his feet against the boxes. They seemed heavy enough to stay where they were.

"Empties, nailed to the floor," explained the man next to him. Mario recognized the voice of José.

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"Just a few at the back are full of stuff in case we are stopped."

"Is Felipe up front with the driver?" asked Mario.

"Not that one. He goes back to get his truck and go to Tijuana for another load."

Mario's voice quavered. "He does not come?"

"No. Like I say. He's gone back."

"Will we get to El Centro soon?"

"El Centro? We do not go to El Centro. We are going by back roads to a ranch near Brawley to work for a man Felipe knows. Me, José, I go there every year to pick cotton."

Mario tried to keep his voice steady. He did not want to let these men know he was frightened. "How far is Brawley from El Centro?"

"About fourteen miles."

"Felipe said this truck would take me to El Centro."

José laughed.

"I must find my aunt, *señor*."

"A good joke, that. You will not get to El Centro, *amigo*, until you pay this driver, and Felipe, and the man at the ranch for bringing you across the border."

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This voice in the darkness was high, and the laugh behind it was unkind.

"You think you get all this for nothing?" asked another voice. "Nobody gets anything for nothing."

Mario felt suffocated in the close darkness of the truck. "How much will it cost to pay these people?" His voice was pitched high above the sound of the engine.

"You pay it out of the cotton money."

"I cannot stay to pick cotton. I must find my aunt in El Centro before she goes back to Tijuana. Felipe called my aunt's house. They told him where to find her, in El Centro."

The unkind cackle of laughter started all the men laughing. The hot, dark space inside the truck was filled with hateful laughter.

"This innocent thinks they will let him go for nothing! After they have risked their necks to get him across the border!"

"Your aunt is not in El Centro," said a voice across from him. "Felipe did not even try to get her on the telephone, eh, José?"

"Mario, the wetback," answered José. His voice was not unkind like some of the others. "You will

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pick cotton with the rest of us. You will pay for your trip and the food you eat and the wood to cook it, and the filthy shack they give us to live in, by the sweat of your body. The water you drink and the sun-baked air you breathe are free, but you will pay for those also, with the blisters on your knees."

"I have never picked cotton," stammered Mario.

"You will never learn younger, *amigo*."

"The men at that ranch will have to watch out for this one," said the first voice. "He is not big like the boy we had once before. The truant officers comb the fields for kids like this."

"To put them in the schools!" said another. "What sense is that? The kids do not want to go to school. They want to pick cotton to earn money for the movies."

"When he finds you have no people over here to care for you," said the first voice, "they will lock you up."

"That's right," said another. "The man with the silver star came and took the last boy to the receiving home."

"What is a receiving home?" asked Mario. But in his heart he knew.

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"It is a house with bars like a jail. They receive you there, and they never let you go."

"When you hear the words, 'truant officer'," said José, not unkindly, "just duck. It is easy to disappear in a cotton field."

The men began talking of other things. Mario shut his ears to the talk and turned his face to the square of light over the boxes at the back. He braced himself against the swaying of the truck.

"Vaya con Dios," La Vieja had said. It seemed a strange way to go with God. "Santa María, pray for me!" he begged under his breath.

At each turn in the long flight from Loreto there had seemed to be no choice. If it was meant for him to pick cotton, thought Mario, then he would pick cotton. But he was sure it was not meant for him to be shut in a receiving home, to be shut in a jail. Of that Mario was certain. Had not La Vieja and Doctor Gabriel made that clear to everyone all the years since the Big Wind?

There were certain things he must do. He must learn from these Mexican men, since he could not speak very much English, in which direction El Centro was from Brawley. Fourteen miles was not

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too far. Less than halfway from Loreto to San Xavier. If the *padres* could walk from Loreto to San Xavier, and carry besides a heavy load for the mission, he, Mario, could walk half that far with his box and his bag of shells.

In El Centro was where the American woman lived, the lady-who-flew-her-own-plane. She had given him her name and address on a card. It was in his pocket with the letter that had the number of Tía Lucita. The American woman would pay a hundred *pesos* for a single shell, the very shell he had brought with him, tied in the bundle at his belt. Mario's fingers found the bundle and felt the rough spines of the black and white shell through the layers of cloth that wrapped it.

A hundred *pesos* was a lot of money, thought Mario. Surely such a vast sum would pay all of his debts, and his way back to Tijuana besides.

There was another thing he must do. He must keep out of the way of the truant officers, whoever they were. This he could see. But how did you know who was a truant officer? If the law ever caught up with him, Mario felt sure he would land in a receiving home. This was, in Mario's mind, the same

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thing as landing in jail. Some voice in the dark of the truck had said so. "There are bars on the windows, like a jail," the voice had said. "They will lock you up if they catch you."

It wouldn't even be a Mexican jail or orphanage. It would be an American jail. The terrors of that were beyond all imagining.

He would keep his head on a hinge, like the little owls that lived in the *cardones*. He would listen for those words with both ears. "Truant officer." He would hide in the cotton. They would never catch him.

He would work until he had paid these debts, debts he did not know he had until now. He would sell his shell and go back to Tijuana, on the other side of the border. He would find Tía Lucita. He would find La Vieja, and they would go back to Loreto. All would be as it had been.

With this firmly settled, Mario put his head against the jiggling boxes and slept.

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THE COTTON CAMP

MARIO awoke, dripping wet, in the fierce heat of the late morning. The truck had started down a steep grade. The inside of the truck was like an oven, the dead air reeking.

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"We're starting downgrade into the Imperial Valley," said José. "Even the highway is steep through the Devil's Canyon."

"Plenty hot," grumbled a voice.

"It is the sun, *amigo*, that grows cotton," answered José.

"Water, too," said another. "Where is the canteen?"

The water in the canteen was lukewarm, but it was wet.

"Lucky if we get through without a road block. They have been stopping cars to look for wetbacks on the Calexico road."

"What will they do with us if they find us?" asked Mario.

"Put you in jail," cackled the high voice.

"Your tongue is like a *cholla, amigo,*" said José. "They do not put boys in jail. The receiving home, maybe, but not jail."

Mario could see no difference. He braced himself as the truck careened around the unseen curves. After a long hour, the road straightened out. They bowled along at a good clip on a smooth road.

Mario was as glad as the rest of them when the

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wheels of the truck crunched over a gravel road and came to a halt. Someone came to pull down the boxes. They climbed out, stiff and sore from the long ride. The sunshine was blistering and blinding, but better than the oven of a truck.

They had driven into a large field of green plants, on both sides as far as Mario could see. White puffs showed between the withered leaves. Mario knew that this was cotton. It did not look so hard to pick—cotton.

Along one side of the road was a long row of wooden shacks. They were all alike, both in the way they were built and in their paintless, ramshackle, hopeless sag of roof and tin chimney. The space in front of the cabins was littered with papers, old clothes, empty tin cans, and other trash. Behind the cabins there was an open irrigation ditch where a handful of children were screaming and playing. Two old cars, rusty and dented, rested on wheels with no tires. Among them were better cars, some shiny and new. Sagging lines held diapers and limp, faded clothing. Some small children hanging about the doorways stared through red-rimmed eyes and straggling hair. Some of them looked like the chil-

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dren Mario knew in Loreto. Others were slant-eyed or dark-skinned. All of them seemed dirty and uncared for.

The hot desert sun beat down on the unshaded houses. Further down the ditch there were a few cottonwoods. Mario could see tents there and envied them the shade.

A tall, cross-looking man with a pencil and blank book was taking names and assigning cabins. When he came to Mario, he frowned. "How old are you?" he asked in Spanish. "Did you come with the rest of this bunch?"

"*Sí señor,* I come from Mexico in the truck. I have eleven years."

"You ever picked cotton?"

"No, *señor.*"

The man swore. "Is Felipe crazy? Okay! Okay! We can't send you back until you've earned expenses. If anybody stops by here, nosing around, you're José's son. And don't you forget it. You do, and I'll lick the pants off you. And you're sixteen, see? Say it and stick to it. They can't prove any different."

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"*Sí, señor.*" Mario was just as anxious as the man was not to have to prove anything to anybody.

"You understand?"

"*Sí, señor,*" answered Mario, it being easier to say he did than that he didn't.

"Everybody dump your gear. Then come to the truck and get your sacks. I'm paying by the pound and I don't want to weigh in less than a full sack." He turned to Mario. "You better take a small bag to start with, bub." He turned away, grumbling. "There's half a day's work left, so get going."

In the cabin assigned to him, Mario dropped his box and his bag of shells on the sagging mattress of an iron cot. There was no blanket. The airless cabin, with its one door and one window, smelled of onions, of burned cabbage, of unnamable ancient smells, none of which was pleasant.

A wave of longing swept over Mario for the tidy hut of La Vieja. It had always been clean and sweet smelling, with its neat palm thatch and well-swept floor of hardened earth.

He followed the men out to the cotton truck and watched them put the long cotton sacks over their

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shoulders. He took his own smaller bag and followed them.

"Go with José, you," shouted the weigher-in. "He'll show you the ropes."

Further down the field there were many pickers bent over the plants, their long canvas bags dragging behind them. Mario stayed close to José and watched him as he started down the row.

"Reach in and pull out the whole boll of cotton," José explained to him. "Twist it just a little to get every bit of it. Keep the leaf and boll trash out of your sack. Don't try to open up a half-open boll. Leave it to ripen for the next picking. But pick all the ripe cotton before you move on. They expect you to pick it clean."

"How do I hold the sack, *señor*? See how it drags on the dirt?"

"You don't. Let it drag. You take that side of the row and I'll take this."

They started off together, but Mario was still picking his first cotton plant when José started on his fourth. José's hands seemed to fly over the bushes, and all the ripe cotton was in his sack before he moved on.

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At first it seemed easy. But the sun was burning hot. Mario's muscles, still sore from the long, cramped ride, began to ache. His fingers were scratched and bleeding from the sharp points of the cotton bolls. His bag grew heavier and heavier as it dragged over the rough clods of plowed ground behind him.

He had to kneel to get the cotton that grew low on the stalks. His knees went from soreness to rawness on the broken ground. The last hour of the day was pure agony.

José came back dragging a plump, full sack. He reached down and prodded Mario's bag. "You won't get much for that, *amigo*." He stripped three bushes, pushing the cotton into Mario's sack. All the way to the wagon he picked cotton. He seemed to dance about the bushes, his hands moving too quickly to see.

"It is like magic!" said Mario.

José grinned. "Each kind of work is an art, *amigo*. You do it well or you do it badly, according to your pride. Me, I am a cotton picker. One of the best. Each man should have some one thing he does well. Then he can look the world in the eye and say,

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'This is my work. I do it better than most. I do it at my own best. I can be proud of this work.'"

Mario nodded. "I am going to be a doctor, *señor*. I am going to be a good doctor. One of the best."

There was, in Mario's mind, a nagging doubt about this last bit of boasting. He was remembering the English lessons and the reading. Without them, Doctor Gabriel had said, he could never learn enough to be a doctor. "Do you speak English, *Señor* José?"

"*Cierto*, of course." José eased the long bag on his shoulder. "When you go back and forth like I do, over the fence, you learn to speak English pretty good, pretty fast."

Mario trudged on, the bag wearing a sore place on his shoulder. His shirt was soaked with perspiration until it was plastered to his bent back. It is not only the river that makes wetbacks, thought Mario, it is hard work and the hot sun. These would make a wetback of anyone.

"Come to the store and get some bread and beans," said José. "Maybe they will have bananas. Do you have a blanket for your bed?"

"No, *señor*. But I do not have much money."

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"You don't need money. You can take home what you want and pay with your work."

"I am already owing too much money."

"What for?"

"For the trip from Mexico. For the house. For the cotton bag. The men say this."

José spat on the ground. "You don't owe anybody anything. You were hijacked out of Mexico. You didn't ask to come, did you?"

"I agreed to come, to find my aunt Lucita."

"You didn't agree to pick cotton, eh?"

"No, *señor*. I haven't ever before picked cotton."

"You could send Felipe to jail for that. Only you'll never catch him. The houses are beastly holes. Most of us bring canvas and rig up tents. The cotton bag you can turn in when you are through. It is only a loan."

"I do not have to stay here and work to pay back all this money?"

"No. Felipe brought you over the fence because he had promised the ranch so many pickers and he did not have them. You don't owe him a *peso*."

They stopped talking when they reached the truck. Mario's bag weighed so little the weigher

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snorted with disgust. He dumped the cotton out onto the snowy pile in the truck. "Hardly worth writing down," he growled.

"See that you do it just the same, Manuel," said José. "The boy is new at this business."

Manuel glared at José, but he entered the weight of the cotton against Mario's name.

"Come on, *amigo*," said José. "That will buy you beans and bread."

On the way to the store Mario asked José, "Which way is El Centro from here, *señor, por favor?*"

"About fourteen miles south. Why?"

"Is that where the truant officer comes from?"

"*Sí*, he comes from there. But the boss knows his car. He will see him come. The little kids, too young for school, they will come to tell you. If you drop down between the cotton rows, no one will ever find you."

Mario took back to his shanty a loaf of bread and a can of meat. José explained how to open the can with the little key fastened to the bottom of the can. He also bought a blanket and watched the man put these things down in his book. José tried to get him

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to take some bananas, but Mario did not want anything more set down against his name.

If he did not owe these people the large sum of money he had been worried about, then he was free to go away when he chose. If the cotton rows could hide him from the truant officer by day, they would surely hide him from the man in charge of the pickers in the dark.

He ate some bread and meat and wrapped the rest back in the bread paper, putting it among his things. The cardboard box was too battered to use further. Even the ropes would not hold it together. So Mario rolled his few belongings in the blanket and tied it neatly with the rope. He fastened his shells to his belt. He planned to leave some money for the food and the blanket. José had said the cotton would pay for the bread and meat. That left only the blanket. How much did a blanket cost? If he got the hundred *pesos* for the shell, he could pay for the blanket. He needed to keep what money he had.

He waited for several hours, listening to the voices shouting, singing, quarreling. When he was sure the tired workers were asleep, he slid out the door and crossed the bridge over the ditch. He

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walked boldly down the rows of cotton. Not even a dog barked behind him. Sooner or later he would come to a road, a road that would take him south to El Centro.

The road, when he came to it, at the edge of the big field, ran east and west. Not south from the North Star that glittered in the sky. He walked east until he reached another going south. He started down this road, but it ended in a dooryard where two dogs set up a fearful clamor.

Mario hurried back to the road. This time he watched for a road sign before he started south. The stars were bright, and the moon would soon be up.

When he heard a car coming, he hid in the tall Johnson grass along the ditch. He thought they must surely see him when the lights came close. But the car drove by without stopping. In Loreto he would have tried to thumb a ride. But in Loreto he knew everyone who owned a car. It was safe. Here in this strange land, where he would have a hard time asking and answering questions, it was wiser to travel alone, and on foot.

He kept on to the south for two hours, at a better than walking pace, in spite of his aching legs and

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back. He must be many miles on his way. It was far enough. No one would know where he had gone, unless it was José, because of the questions. Mario felt that José would not give him away. He also thought the man who was in charge of the workers would not bother with a boy who was not very good at picking cotton.

He came to a long windbreak of tamarisk trees, feathery against the midnight sky. He pushed through them and found himself on the edge of a vineyard. Here he made for himself a bed of sorts, lifting out clods until he had a smooth hollow, lining it with a heap of fallen grape leaves. He laid his blanket on the warm earth beside him, knowing it would be a comfort in the bitter desert cold before dawn. He pillowed his head on his roll of clothes.

He was glad to be out of the greasy, smelly cotton shack. His tired, aching muscles were glad to be out of the cotton field. It was good to be free and on his own once again. His feet were headed south toward Mexico and home. It was good to be out under the stars, the same stars he could see from his bed on the floor of La Vieja's hut. It was better to feel the warm

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earth beneath him, on a bed of rustling grape leaves, than a dirty mattress on sagging springs.

He woke while the stars were still shining, but they were different stars than the ones he had watched when he fell asleep. It was comforting to know that the same stars rose and set over this American desert that wheeled through the night over Loreto. He pulled the blanket over him and snuggled down under its welcome warmth.

He thought of La Vieja. Was she well again? Doctor Gabriel would see that she was in good hands. Had Doctor Gabriel talked to the telephone to let Aunt Lucita know that he, Mario, had come to Tijuana? He wished that he could have left word somewhere, somehow, so that his people could know where he was, that he was safe in the hands of God.

But how? He had thought that he was on his way to Aunt Lucita when he crossed the fence with Felipe. But all the time it had been a cruel joke.

He thought of the American woman. He had the shell she had liked. The money for the shell would get him back to Mexico again. He sent a little prayer for help to guide his steps to her.

At the thought of this big, strong woman who

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could help him, Mario threw back his blanket and jumped up. He brushed the leaves from his clothes and straightened his jacket. He ran the pink celluloid comb, that Dr. Gabriel had given him, through his hair. It was the best he could do.

He rolled his belongings into a neat, tight roll and roped it. Stooping to pick it up, he saw on one of the grape vines close to his bed a bunch of grapes overlooked by the pickers. After he had eaten some bread and the last of the tinned meat, he picked the grapes. With his shells swinging at his belt, his blanket roll over his shoulder, he walked south down the road. The grapes in his hand were almost as dark as raisins, sweet as wild honey.

Ahead of him the mountains of Mexico were clear-cut in the early dawn. The few stars above him still trembled in the dark sky. It was cold and crisp and clear. A cock crowed in a farmyard. A turkey gobbled in answer. Mario's feet almost danced along the road.

A mile or so beyond where he had slept, a pickup truck came out of a driveway too fast for Mario to duck into the ditch. When the truck stopped at the gate, Mario's back stiffened. He tried to walk on by

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as though he knew exactly where he was going and how to get there. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the driver lift down some heavy cans and leave them at the gate.

"Going my way, pal?" asked the big, gangling man.

Mario's heart was pounding as he looked into the weather-beaten face of the farmer. He noticed the sandy eyebrows and the sandy hairs on the freckled hands lifting the big cans.

"I'm headed into El Centro once I get this cream unloaded. Give you a lift?"

Mario understood much of this. He knew the man was offering him a ride, and that he was going to El Centro. But did he want to go with anyone? Wasn't he safer alone?

He looked up into the man's kindly face, with laugh wrinkles around his mouth and sun wrinkles around his blue eyes. Just as he had felt that he could not trust Felipe, Mario sensed that here was a man he could.

"*Sí, señor. Muchas gracias.*" He climbed into the cab of the small truck, his roll beside him.

"What's your name, pal?"

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"Mario."

"Mine's Bill. Goin' on a Scout hike, huh? They sure do a lot for kids nowadays. Scouts, Campfire, 4-H clubs. Wish I'd had some of it. I wouldn't be such an old stick-in-the-mud. Wore my nose clean off on a grindstone. I tell Liddie—that's my girl—I say, Liddie, you can have rabbits or pigs or raise yourself a calf to sell. But, honey, don't you ever learn to milk a cow. You'll be tied to their tails the rest of your life, I told her. You ever milk a cow, pal?"

"Perdóneme, señor?"

"I guess I talk too fast. You're not over here very long, I can see that. What I said was—" he repeated it very slowly, "—ever milk a cow?"

Mario understood the word for milk and the word for cow. It pleased him to understand this question. He chuckled. "No, *señor*. No *vaca*. No cow. I meelk —— Oh!" he groaned. His long lashes swept his cheeks in agony of soul. He could not think of the word he wanted "How do you say—eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh?" He gave the plaintive call of a milk goat.

The farmer roared with laughter. "Goats, eh?"

"Sí! Sí, señor!" Mario was beaming. "Gots!"

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The way he said it sent the driver off into fresh spasms of laughter. From then on they were two farmers together, bowling along the highway into town.

When they drove into El Centro, already busy and full of cars, even before the sun rose, Mario's heart quailed. The traffic seemed a hopeless snarl, with cars missing each other by inches. This was another huge city stretching out on the flat desert, as Tijuana had been flung across the hills.

"Where you want to go, Mario?"

Mario's answer was a mixture of Spanish and what English words he could dredge up. "Do you know an American lady named *Señorita* Blake?"

"Hattie? Sure, everybody knows Hattie."

Mario drew the card from his pocket. "It says here, *señor*, Hattie Blake, El Centro. Even it says her street."

"Where'd you run into Hattie? She's a character. Heart of gold. But you kids gotta mind your P's and Q's from now on. No more hidin' in the cotton. Hattie flies that plane of hers over a cotton field like a jack rabbit jumps a tumbleweed. No place to hide

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from Hattie. A truant officer like Hattie means business."

Mario's heart turned over with a sickening lurch. These were the words he had been dreading. "*Señorita* Hattie?" he asked. But he knew before the farmer answered.

"Sure. Hattie Blake's our new truant officer."

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THE TRAP

IT WAS a trap. Like the ride with Felipe, it was a cruel joke. Mario was trembling as he tried to open the door beside him. They weren't driving very fast in town. He thought he could jump out. If he ran fast enough he could find a hiding place, a hid-

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ing place where he couldn't be seen, even from the air. He was sure he could find a place to hide before this man could turn his car around, or park this truck and come after him.

"It's locked, son," said the quiet voice beside him. "I wouldn't care to have anybody jumpin' out while she's movin'." He drew over to the curb and stopped. But he made no move to open the door.

Mario tried the handle again. "*Por favor, señor?*" he quavered.

"Well—but just a minute. Let's have a little palaver. You in trouble with Hattie? Been cuttin' school, maybe, huh?" Bill put his big front teeth over his lower lip and raised a pair of sandy eyebrows.

Mario was silent. His knuckles were white where he had his hand pressed against the door handle. What was the use of telling people things? He had told Felipe, and look where it had brought him. And now this man would take him into the very jaws of the law itself.

Bill waited patiently, his eyes on the drawn face of the boy beside him. He put a freckled, work-worn hand on Mario's knee. He could feel the tensed mus-

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cles, ready to spring away like a trapped rabbit. "You know something?" he said, slowly and carefully. "If I was in trouble—— You savvy trouble, Mario?"

"Oh, *sí! Sí, señor!*" whispered Mario. He'd known nothing but trouble for days.

"Well—if I was in trouble—no matter *what*—I don't know anybody I'd like to have on my side better'n Miss Hattie." He waited.

Mario understood the tone of this, if not the words. But Mario was a wetback. He had come into this country against the law. He had sneaked in over a fence at night. There loomed before him the awful threat of the barred windows of an orphanage, a receiving home, a jail. Places where they received you and never let you go. Places where they would shut a boy away forever from La Vieja, from Doctor Gabriel, from the sleepy town he loved, cradled in jagged mountains on the ink-blue Sea of Cortez.

"Let me go, *señor*. *Por favor*. Please!" Mario's voice broke and he dashed the tears from his eyes with a grubby, angry hand.

The man beside him pulled a red bandanna from his pocket and offered it. Mario dried his unmanly tears and scrubbed his nose.

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"I dunno what you could of done—short of murder," mused Bill, "to get you in sech a swivet. And the worst of it is, I don't know how to get you *on*-tangled, without Miss Hattie. She's the only one I know talks your lingo."

He sat there thinking, and he could feel the boy beside him relax a little.

Mario was thinking, too. This man, he told himself, he is not like Felipe. He is honest. He is kind. I am sure, I am truly sure of this. If he meant to take me to jail, he could have done it while the car was moving. He can take me to this truant woman any time he chooses. I am locked in this car. I even told him her name and where she lived. Still he waits.

"Lor', I wish I knew some Mexican." Bill scratched his head and squinted into the rising sun. "Where'd y'git this card? Huh, Mario?" He tapped the card he still held in his fingers. "Looks like Hattie might have even wrote this."

"*Señorita* Hattie gave to me this card. In Loreto." Mario untied the small bundle of shells from his belt. He unwrapped them and showed Bill the white one with the black points. "She told me if I found a shell like this, she would buy it. For one hundred

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pesos." He put the card and shell together. "One hundred *pesos, señor.*"

Bill understood. He took the shell gently in his big hands. "Yeah. This is really a sockdologer. She collects 'em. Puts 'em in the hobby show every year. I just bet she did want this one. But she's sure poison to you, pal, as far as I can see. Something to do with this truant business." He rubbed the day-old stubble along his chin. "Shoulda shaved before I left home. I knew it. Always get caught. I was scared I'd miss the cream truck."

Mario listened. He could not understand what Bill was saying. But somehow his first panic was gone. Once again he had decided to trust this long, lanky farmer in his bibbed overalls and smile-lined, puzzled face.

The two of them sat together in the locked cab of the pickup, both of them thinking what to do, what to do.

Suddenly Bill struck the steering wheel with his big, freckled hand. "I got it, Mario. We're not very far from Miss Hattie's house." At the puzzled look on Mario's face, he tried again. "See here! Miss Hattie—you savvy Miss Hattie?"

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"*Sí, señor.*" Doubt again had crept into Mario's voice.

"Don't panic. It's okay. Now listen. I'll take this shell——" he held up the shell—he pointed down the block and around the corner. "To Miss Hattie. You got that?" When Mario nodded, Bill went on. "You won't have to go, see? You—no! Me—yes! I'll get the hundred *pesos*." He pointed to himself and patted his palm. Then he pointed to Mario. "I'll bring you the money. You won't have to see Miss Hattie, Mario." He spoke with great earnestness. "On my word of honor—okay?"

Mario stared down at his brown hands. Was this another trap?

The big man beside him reached across Mario and unlocked the car door. He unlocked the door on his own side and slid out from under the wheel. He came around the pickup and casually opened the door beside Mario. Then he closed it again, but Mario could see that he didn't lock it.

"I'm going to walk around to Hattie's house," he said slowly. "I'll take her the shell. I won't tell her where you are, Mario. And you're free to skip and

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run if you choose. But if you wait here, I'll bring you back the hundred *pesos*, understand?"

Mario raised his gray eyes, sick with fear, to the smiling blue ones above him. He didn't understand. One part of him was saying, over and over, the door is not locked. As soon as he is out of sight I can run, I can hide. Another, a steadier voice, was saying, don't run, Mario. This man is kind, he is good. He will get the money from this truant woman. Like José, he will not tell. The money will pay for the blanket, it will pay the way back to Tijuana. Don't run, Mario. This man is good.

Bill reached a fist into the car and gently punched Mario's shoulder. "So long, pal. Sit tight. I'll be back." He turned away and went off down the street with long, swinging strides. He turned around at the corner and waved. Then he was gone.

Mario tried the door of the pickup. It opened at once. He even got out and stood on the sidewalk, a wary eye on the corner. There were birds singing in the trees that lined the street. Here and there a car backed out of a driveway. An old man was pushing a machine ahead of him around a green square of

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grass. The cut grass whirled into the canvas basket behind the wheels. This was a thing of wonder.

Mario climbed back into the car. He held the door open a little with his foot. He could go now. He could run any time. He would follow the streets and the roads to the south until he reached the fence. Then he would walk along the fence between Mexico and the U.S.A. until he came to the place to pay.

Pay with what? All he had was the small amount left of the money that Doctor Gabriel had given him. Without the hundred *pesos* for the shell, Mario knew that he did not have enough money to cross the border into Mexico. He moved his foot and let the door of the car swing shut with a little click.

When the tall, lanky figure of Bill came around the corner, he was alone. He waved as he came loping along the block, his face one big beaming smile.

"Sure am glad to see you, Mario. Tell you the truth, I wasn't quite sure when I left here. I wasn't sure about you, or Hattie either. I just about had to get her out of bed. She was too sleepy to argue. She

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just handed me the money." He came up to the door and handed Mario some paper money.

"Gracias, señor!"

"A hundred *pesos* don't look like much when it's American dough. But nobody around here will take *pesos*."

Mario looked at the strange money. He nodded gravely. If this man said this was a hundred *pesos*, then it was. But there was something he had to know. He had put his entire trust in this man now. He was no longer afraid to tell Bill a little about his worries.

"Where you headed now, Mario?"

"Señor, how much of this money would pay for this blanket?" Mario held up the money and patted the blanket around the roll beside him on the seat.

"Oh Lor'!" murmured Bill. "What's he driving at now? Suppose this kid's got himself in a jam? Made off with somebody's stuff, maybe?" But as he looked down into the pleading gray eyes, he didn't believe it. "You trusted me, Mario, and darned if I don't trust you."

He walked around and climbed in the front seat. He leaned over and pinched the wool of the blanket

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between his fingers. He shook his head. "Not worth much, Mario. Old army stuff, washed and rewashed. Thin as tissue paper." He took two of the American dollars from the bills Mario offered him. "This will do it."

Mario tried to explain that the money must go back to the cotton camp to pay for the blanket. Would *Señor* Beel send it to them, *por favor?* Since Mario didn't know the name for a cotton camp, or the name of the rancher who grew the cotton, Bill didn't get much out of this.

Bill scratched his head and wrinkled up his eyes, trying to understand. He shook his head. "You and me, we gotta have some help, Mario. Not Hattie. I promised. They must have somebody over at the Welfare Office talks Spanish. Let's get some breakfast. I'm starved. By that time they'll be open." He reached over and patted the blanket roll. "Just like I know what it's all about!" he muttered.

Mario nodded contentedly. *Señor* Beel would take care of the matter. This last debt must be paid before Mario could shake the dust of the cotton field from his feet.

The truck rolled down the street to a drive-in. Bill

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parked on the shady side, under a wide overhang. He told the girl they wanted orange juice and a stack of hots, and two eggs apiece, with a side order of bacon—crisp, too—and two cups of coffee both for me, sister—and a glass of milk.

Mario was struck dumb over the arrangement of the tray balanced on the car window and spread out in front of him. He had never sucked milk through a straw. He had never tasted bacon as thin as paper and crisp as a toasted tortilla.

He ate every scrap of the soft "hots," dripping with butter and a sweet brown sauce of such goodness he spooned up every last drop from his plate.

"You really cleaned up, Mario. I bet you haven't had a square meal for days. I feel like a new man myself," Bill rumbled, stifling a yawn. He stretched his long arms with his hands on the top of the car. "I feel like I could tackle a buzz saw. Even the problem of you, Mario. Come on, let's go. We'll hit the Welfare Office and try our luck."

They parked the truck in a service station to be filled with gas. Mario trotted along beside Bill, who, he was sure, was going to show him where to send the money for the blanket.

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They stopped at a big building. Bill poked his head in the door of an office on the first floor. "Anybody here speak Spanish?"

"We're not even speaking English this early," the girl told him. "Go on down four doors. There might be somebody there."

"Okay. Come on, Mario." Bill counted four doors and knocked.

"Come in!" boomed a hearty voice.

They walked in. Seated at a desk, with a pile of papers in front of her, a scrap of a hat sliding off her high braid of hair, was Hattie Blake.

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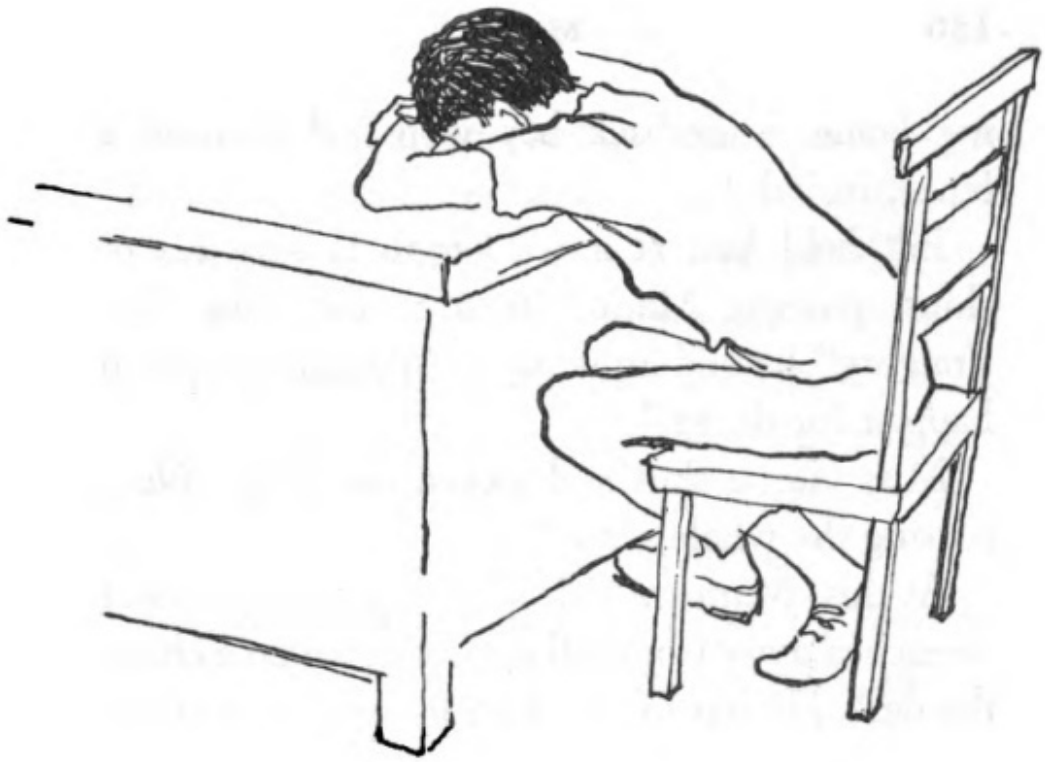

MISS HATTIE

MARIO!" Miss Hattie beamed at them. "Hey! Where you going? Bill, grab him. Don't let him get away. I want to thank him."

Bill caught Mario by his jacket and held him.

Mario fought like a wild cat, kicking and clawing, sobbing and shouting, "All the time it was a trap!"

This was the American woman, the truant officer who would put boys with no relatives in the receiv-

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ing home, a wetback boy who had climbed the fence, in jail.

Bill held him at arm's length to save his own shins, pinning Mario's arms to his sides. "Gosh a'mighty!" he said unhappily. "Wouldn't of had this happen for ducks."

Miss Hattie shut and locked the door. "No use rousing the whole place."

At this, Mario wilted. The trap was sprung. He wrenched away from Bill and sat down on a chair by the desk. He put his head on his arms and cried all the bitter tears he had kept bottled up since Doctor Gabriel had told him La Vieja was so sick they would have to leave Loreto. He had tried, he had really tried to do all the right things. All this trying had led him straight to this woman, a woman big enough and powerful enough to lock him up. She was the Law, with the power to put him in jail for the things he had not meant to do.

Miss Hattie sat down beside Mario and patted his shaking back. She pressed her big, strong fingers into the nape of his neck and rubbed it with firm strokes. She slid her hands to his shoulders, and her big thumbs moved up and down his aching spine. She

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looked up at Bill and cocked a questioning eyebrow.

Bill stood with his hands deep in his overall pockets, a worried frown on his face. "I promised him—I gave him my word of honor—he wouldn't have to see you. Then we run spang into you! Just like I'd planned to fool him. He must think I'm lower'n a rabid skunk. Pore little kid. What'd you ever do to him, Hattie? He's scared to death of you."

"Not a darn thing." She was surprised. She went right on rubbing the back of Mario's neck, moving her hands down his back in a sort of rhythm.

"Well, he turns green when your name comes up."

"I didn't even know he was here. I met him on the beach at Loreto. I thought we liked each other. He brought me a simply beautiful shell. Afterward I went to his school. The doctor down there sets store by this boy. Showed me some of his work. That's when I saw that shell. Never saw one like it. He wouldn't sell it. So I told him I'd give him a hundred *pesos* if he'd find me one. Took me by surprise when you came in with it this morning, selling me a shell for eight bucks. I figured you needed the

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money. I wasn't really awake yet, or I would have known it was Mario."

Slowly but surely the racking sobs had quieted. Miss Hattie went right on rubbing.

Mario sat up and pushed her hands away. His face was bloated with crying, his eyes red.

Miss Hattie reached for a paper handkerchief, but Bill offered the bandanna. "For a major mop-up like this, he needs a man-sized swab." Mario took the bandanna.

Miss Hattie gave him one last pat and sat back. "Sit down yourself, Bill. Got time?"

He grinned. "You know me. Milkin's all done for this morning. Only a thousand undone jobs leering at me." He sat down across the room. "But I gotta see this thing through. This kid's got a problem."

She nodded and turned to Mario. "First of all, Mario," she said in Spanish, "I want to tell you how much I like that beautiful shell." She had toned down her big, booming voice until it was low and friendly.

Mario said nothing, staring down at the red bandanna. His eyelashes were still tangled with tears, his lips were pressed tight to control their trembling.

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This woman and her shells! The first shell had brought him a shark, an evil thing. For Mario the shark could have been the cause of all the trouble that had befallen La Vieja and himself. The second shell had run him straight into a noose, like a stupid calf that runs headlong into a looped riata.

"When did you come here, Mario, from Loreto?"

Mario said nothing. Why should he tell this woman when and why and how he had come? That would finish it.

"Where are you staying?" Her voice was getting a little impatient.

Where, indeed? He was not staying. He was going. He meant to go if he had to tear the bars from the windows with his bare hands.

"Looks like I can't get through to him with anything," said Miss Hattie in English.

"Could be he jumped the border, huh?" suggested Bill.

"Might be. But a boy as young as this usually comes with a family." She turned to Mario. "Where is your family, Mario?"

This was it. This was the question he had been dreading. They locked you up if you had no family.

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For a wild moment he thought of inventing a family. But it wouldn't work. This woman who flew her own plane would fly to wherever he said they were. Then she would know him for a liar, as well as a fence climber. It was better to be silent. What could they prove if you did not use words to tighten the rope?

"Guess I've got to get tough." Miss Hattie sighed. She turned a stern eye on Mario. "Show me your papers," she barked at him.

Mario slumped back against the chair. He spread his hands out in a gesture of defeat. His gray eyes, as he raised them to Miss Hattie's, were full of a numb despair.

Miss Hattie laughed and reached down to pat his shoulder. "That did it." She spoke directly to Mario in Spanish. "So you came across without papers, Mario? That's not so bad. We can fix you up with papers if you want to stay. We'll fix you up if you want to go home. What do you want to do?"

He could not believe his ears. "Oh, *señor, señorita! Por favor!* I want to go home!" His voice cracked on the last word.

"No reason why you can't."

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"You will not put me in jail?"
Her big laugh boomed out. "Heavens, no!"
Mario put his hand in his pocket and pulled out all his money. He laid the Mexican money and the American money all together on the desk. "Is it enough?" he asked. Bill reached over and added the two dollars Mario had given him.

"You won't need any money." She pushed it back. "We'll get you across. I'll see the border people. But I do have to know one thing, Mario. Where do you plan to go when you get to Mexicali?"

"Mexicali, *señorita*? My aunt, Tía Lucita, she lives in Tijuana. Here is her name and where she lives and the number that talks to her. Nobody could reach her, but this is the number. Not in Mexicali. In Tijuana."

"Tijuana is a long way from here. It's over on the coast. How do you figure to get from Mexicali to Tijuana?"

"I shall walk, *señorita*." Once he got on the other side of the fence, Mario was sure he could walk to the moon.

"That's a long dry walk. You haven't money enough to buy food or put a roof over your head."

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"I do not need a roof, *señorita*. I have my blanket." He put two of the paper dollars to one side. "*Señor* Beel says this much will pay for this blanket."

"What's all this about a blanket, Bill?"

"Darned if I know. It's no great shakes as a blanket. He gave me as much as it's worth. Only I can't get out of him where to send the money. Somehow I don't think he snitched it."

"I'll find out. But I'll have to go slow. He's like one of the Kaibab deer. They're used to people and they come to the tents for food, but they're ready to take off at the first false move. I think I'll take a chance and call this aunt. But first I'm going to make him a certificate. It won't get him much of anywhere, but it will give him peace of mind."

"Anything more I can do?"

"I don't think so, Bill. I think we can straighten this out. If he gets away, it shouldn't be too hard to pick him up."

Bill stood up. He started over to shake hands with Mario and then thought better of it. He waved, unlocked the door, and stood there for a moment. "Tell him sometime, will you, that I really didn't mean to

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run him in here? I can't help liking the little guy. I hate to have him think I double-crossed him."

"I'll fix it when he stops being scared of me."

Bill went off down the hall, leaving the door open behind him. Mario looked after him with a puzzled frown.

Miss Hattie turned to her typewriter. She ran two sheets of yellow paper with a carbon around the roller. "I'm writing you a permit, Mario," she said in Spanish. "So you can stay in the United States for a few days. Or not, if you wish. Just as you like." She smiled at him. "I'm hoping you'll stay for a few days and find out we aren't so bad after all."

She banged out some sentences and clicked off two lines. She signed both papers and handed them, and a ball-point pen, to Mario. "It says you agree to obey the laws of this country while you are a guest here, and that you can return to Mexico whenever you choose. Okay?"

Mario nodded. He guessed it was all right. He didn't know what the laws were. But maybe someone would tell him. If he went soon, he would not need to worry about laws.

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"You sign them, too, Mario. Then you keep one and I'll keep one."

Mario was proud to have the yellow paper. He folded it carefully and put it on top of his money.

"Now the next thing is to call your aunt. Hand me the card, Mario. I'll get the number and you can talk with her."

When a voice answered, Miss Hattie asked for Lucita García. She nodded and smiled at Mario. "She's there all right. Pull your chair over here so you can talk when I get through. Hello? Lucita García? This is the aunt of Mario from Loreto? Good! He is here in El Centro. He is safe. Oh, yes, a long way. Oh! I'm sure you have been worried to death. Oh! That's why they couldn't get you. You did not know he was coming. Of course not. And the grandma? Wonderful. Think of it! Walking about already. No, it was better not to tell her. She will go back to Loreto? Good! Good! He is right here beside me. I will let him talk with you. Hold the line."

She turned to Mario. "She is so excited. They have all been sick with worry. Here, hold this to your ear, and talk into this."

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Mario almost dropped the phone when he heard the excited voice of his aunt Lucita. He poured into the phone the whole wretched story.

Miss Hattie glanced at the clock and shrugged. "I'm getting my money's worth!" she muttered.

When Miss Hattie finally persuaded Mario to say good-by, Mario was bubbling. "That was my aunt Lucita. Think of it! Miles and miles away and she sounded as though she were here in this room!"

"We forget," said Miss Hattie, "the wonder of it."

"And La Vieja is almost well again!"

"That's the best news of all, isn't it?" Miss Hattie

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shoved the pile of papers to one side. "These can wait. Let's go get an eskimo pie. Have to celebrate. Besides, I came right down here after Bill woke me up. All I had was a cup of coffee." Then she added casually, "Bill didn't know I had an office down here now. He thought I was still working at home."

Mario beamed at her. His faith in his own judgment, in the human race—and in Bill—was fully restored.

Mario had never tasted anything so cold and so delicious as a chocolate-covered square of ice cream on a stick. He had never seen anything so overwhelming as the supermarket where they chose it from a deep white box so cold it made his fingers ache. Such heaps and heaps of vegetables! Such miles and miles of cans and boxes. And a little cardboard man wheeling on a wire across the store and back, holding over his head a box of some kind of food. Mario wanted to ask the clerk what made the little man go, but he had no words for this.

They walked back to Miss Hattie's office, beneath an arched roof over the sidewalk. Mario bit off little chunks of ice cream, catching the cold chocolate on his tongue as it broke. He was in no hurry now. He

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had talked with Tía Lucita. La Vieja was nearly well again. In his pocket was his permission printed on yellow paper. It was a wonderful thing to have a paper.

He licked the last of the ice cream very fast to keep it from melting. Miss Hattie showed him where to drop the stick when he had licked the last smear of sweetness from it, in a can with a swinging lid that stood right there on the street for peelings and papers. This was a good thing, he thought, in a city that had no burros or buzzards to eat such scraps.

When they got back to the office, Bill was waiting for them. "Forgot I had Mario's stuff in the car."

"*Gracias, señor.*" Mario had forgotten it, too. He reached for the little bundle of shells. The big shell was gone, but there were some small ones, exquisitely coiled and colored. If these kind people would not take money, perhaps they would like his shells. He unwrapped them carefully, spread the cloth on the desk, and laid the shells out on top of it.

"Mario!" exclaimed Miss Hattie. "What beauties!"

"Is good?" he asked shyly.

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"Is simply beautiful!"
"Is for you and *Señor* Beel."
Bill started to say, "We can't take your shells——"

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He caught a warning glance from Miss Hattie. "Well, gee whiz! That's mighty fine. Mighty fine!"

"Help yourself, *señor*."

"Suppose I just take one of them to Liddie? She's never seen shells like this."

That was fine with Mario. He had shared what he had.

"I'm going to try to talk him into staying here until the grandmother gets settled in Loreto with the aunt," Miss Hattie said to Bill in English. "Think I stand a chance?"

"I dunno. He's pretty homesick. Did you find out about the blanket?"

"Not yet." She turned to Mario. "Bill says he doesn't know where you should send the money for the blanket. Tell me in Spanish, Mario, so I can tell him."

Mario explained about the store and the food. He was sure his work in the cotton field would pay for the meat and the bread. But he wasn't sure it covered the blanket. "It is not good to go away owing money for a blanket."

Miss Hattie nodded. "That's right." She explained to Bill.

"I'll be darned. But," he added, "tell Mario we

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do not know the name of this ranch. He should stay here for a few days until we can find this ranch and pay this money. How's that for a slick deal?"

"You're smarter than I figured. It might work."

It did. Mario could see that it was necessary for him to stay until his just debts were paid. He could stay with Miss Hattie, she said. After they had found the ranch, she would fly him across the border and see him safe with Aunt Lucita.

Mario gave a long sigh. The trouble that had dogged his steps from the day of the shark had melted like the ice cream on the smooth stick.

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MARIO COMES HOME

EVERYTHING settled now?" asked Bill.

"Just about," answered Miss Hattie. "Here, Mario, help me fold these letters. Like this. Stick them in these envelopes and seal them." She ran the flap of an envelope over a damp sponge and banged her fist down on the envelope on the desk.

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Mario set to work happily.

"I got most of the story when Mario was phoning," Miss Hattie told Bill. "Some trader in wetbacks picked him up in Tijuana. They told him his aunt was over on this side and wanted him to come. Once they got him here they scared him into picking cotton with threats of jail and debts and the new truant officer."

"No wonder he was scared stiff. I'd hate to be a kid out enjoying myself picking cotton and you breathin' down my neck."

"Go sit on a tack," she answered amiably. "I'll call his aunt and tell her we'll keep him a week. We don't have to find this ranch right this minute. I have a good hunch where it is, out north of your place. It'll give me a chance to visit some of the other camps out there and round up the kids."

Bill came over to Mario and reached out a hand. Mario rose to shake hands with him. "Miss Hattie'll see that you get out to the camp to pay off. When you're out that way, stop by my place and we'll dig some ice cream out of the freezer."

Miss Hattie explained all of this in Spanish to Mario.

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"*Gracias, Señor* Beel."

"So long, pal."

When Bill was gone, Miss Hattie shoved her scrap of a hat into place. "Come on, Mario," she said in Spanish, "let's head for the border. We have to get you a little more legal. I have to get a permit to take you back to Mexico." Then she muttered to herself in English, "I don't want to have to prove to either side that I wasn't the one who dragged you over here in the first place."

Mario could have gone on all day folding letters and licking flaps. It made him feel useful. He followed Miss Hattie out into the blinding sunshine, where the metal of the car was almost too hot to touch.

They drove south. For the first time since he had come to this country, Mario could look around him and see what it was like.

It was a rich country, this Imperial Valley, a great *copa de oro*, a cup of gold to catch the sun, the same sun that scorched and baked the cactus jungles around Loreto. He could see that here it was the water in the ditches that laced the land that made it rich.

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His eyes sparkled at the acres of green alfalfa, the ripe maize that was higher than his head, the brown and green fields where pickers bent to pick the white cotton and stuff it in the long sacks they dragged behind them. It made his back ache to watch them. Was it only yesterday when he was bent double, making his painful way down the long row, his hands bleeding from the sharp edges of the cotton bolls, his knees bruised and sore from the rough clods?

Yesterday he had been an outcast in this land of plenty, a wetback. He had been a fugitive ready to hide at the first warning that the law was at hand, the law which was this big American woman beside him who had given him the beautiful yellow paper. The paper had made him no longer a wetback, no longer an outcast. It made him a respectable person with a permit.

"*Señorita* Blake——" he began.

"Call me Aunt Hattie. Everybody does. This *señorita* business makes me feel like I ought to break into a Mexican hat dance." She was grinning at him.

"*Sí*, Tí 'Attie."

"That's good enough. What's on your mind?"

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"Just—how shall I say it?—I owe you many thanks, *señorita*—Tí 'Attie."

"Don't try to say it." Her voice was gruff. "It's my job to straighten things out for kids like you. Next time I need to stop and catch my breath—when I can't stand things another minute—I'll fly down to Loreto again. You can show me where to find those sea shells. You have something down there, Mario. Life's not such a rat race. You take time out to enjoy the beauty around you."

"This is beautiful here, too," said Mario.

"All desert country is beautiful if you look at it with the right slant in your eye. Hot? Sure. So's Egypt. So's India. People save up for years to get there. It's beautiful right here. Look at that field of cabbages. Ever see a prettier color?"

Mario looked at the field of purple cabbage. "*Sí*, Tí 'Attie. It is the lovely color of the Loreto mountains at dawn."

"Yes, it is. Beautiful!"

They stopped on both sides of the border and Mario came back to the car with all the papers he needed. In Mexicali he listened to the Mexicans

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talking on the street. It was good to hear his own tongue.

I am in Mexico, he was thinking. I am on the other side of the fence. I can run if I want to. They could never find me here among my own people.

But he trotted back to the car with Miss Hattie. Mario had papers. He could visit in America because the permit said so. But he was free to go home when he chose.

"Whew!" Miss Hattie's face was beet-red in the midday heat. "I'm bushed!"

"What does it mean—bushed?"

Miss Hattie laughed. When Miss Hattie laughed, it was an explosion of sheer joy, and noisy besides. Every Mexican on that street in Mexicali laughed with her.

"These Mexicans!" she chortled. "They're so much fun! 'Bushed'? Well, it's slang. It means tired out, done in, worn down. I'd like to teach you some English before you go, Mario, but not slang. The Mexican youngsters around here speak both languages. They do better than we do."

Mario tried to think in English. "I es-speak Americano—poco——" he broke down, laughing with her.

"You'll have to do better than that. Come on, let's

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get a bite to eat. There's a good place down the street for enchiladas and tostadas."

As they made their way back to the car, after some hot Mexican food, Mario had trouble keeping his eyes open. He hadn't had much sleep for several nights. There had been days of worry about La Vieja, about the plane, about the law. There had been bruising rides over rough roads in an airless oven of a truck. The cotton picking had been back-breaking work.

In El Centro he stumbled after Miss Hattie up some steps into a cool and airy house, a house with many rooms and all with doors. A quick glance showed him there were no bars on the windows.

"I have to go back to the office, Mario. Take off your shoes and go wash up. I'll put a cotton sheet blanket over the spread so you won't have to worry. You can have a shower later. You've had it, boy!"

"Hokay, Tí 'Attie," murmured Mario. "Me, I'm bushed."

That night while Mario sat beside her, Miss Hattie talked again with Tía Lucita. She made arrangements to keep Mario for a week.

Tía Lucita told Miss Hattie that she was giving

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up her job in Tijuana. She would take La Vieja back to Loreto. "For two years my heart has been lonely for Loreto. But I did not know I was needed. I shall stay there, from now on, to look after La Vieja and Mario."

"*Bueno! Bueno!*" shouted Miss Hattie. "But will you be happy away from the city?"

"*Sí.* Too much work here. Nothing but work, work, work."

"Lots of work in Loreto, too," Miss Hattie reminded her. "Goats. Cooking. Washing. Dust through the walls when the wind blows——"

"Oh, *sí!* But in Loreto one works in one's own time. No clocks to punch. Only the church bells. If you do not get to early Mass, you go later. There is time for *siesta*. In Loreto, if the day is too hot, one sleeps."

"Yes." Miss Hattie sighed. "I know. Here's Mario. Tell your aunt Lucita hello. But save all the news until you see her next week. It's long distance."

The week flew by. It was a time of great wonder. Mario pressed a button and there was a light, brighter than the street lights around the square in Loreto for the Saturday night dance. He turned a

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knob and there were voices singing, or people riding horses or shooting guns on a glass plate set in a box. Often they held up cans of beer or cigarette boxes where the cigarettes popped up by themselves. A white tub filled itself with hot water, with cold water in a stinging spray from a pipe. He watched Miss Hattie stack dishes trimmed with gold in a green basket and shut a door on them. They came out hot and clean and dry.

He did not understand how these things could be, but they were all part of this strange land. He looked and listened and learned the English words for many of the things he saw.

He traveled out in the country with Miss Hattie. They went to cotton camps where Mario watched the children disappear like magic when the men saw Miss Hattie's car. He stopped at *Señor* Bill's ranch, and here Mario saw the cows being milked by machinery. He shut his mind against this. It seemed wrong to him.

He went to schools with Miss Hattie. There was a desk for every child, and books and paper and pencils. There were pictures on the walls, made with colored crayons. In the schoolyards there were rings

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and bars and swings. He thought of the school in the oldest mission in the Californias where there was so little, and his heart was torn with longing for what there was.

He tried not to show surprise at all of these things. A man does not show surprise at the way the rest of the world lives.

At the end of the week Aunt Lucita called to say that La Vieja was well enough to fly back to Loreto.

"Good news!" shouted Miss Hattie into the phone. "You are going to the hospital to take her home to Loreto? Good! I'll bring Mario down to Loreto in my plane on Saturday. He can get to school on Monday. He's lost too much time already. If I keep him around here much longer, people are going to be asking what that new truant officer is doing, keeping a boy that age out of school. I might even get arrested." She winked at Mario.

One day they stopped at the ranch where Mario had picked cotton. He knew it was the right ranch because José was there. But when Mario offered to pay for the blanket, the man in charge of the pickers waved the money off. He had a wary eye on Miss Hattie. "You got the wrong ranch, ma'am. We never

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have had pickers here that age. Boys like him should be in school, ma'am, young as that."

"You're right," said Miss Hattie. "Come along, Mario. You don't owe this man a thing."

The last day Miss Hattie took him to a huge store. He had never seen such a wealth of things. There were even stuffed animals as big as life. There were so many things he had never seen before that he got tired just looking.

Miss Hattie helped him pick out presents to take back to La Vieja and Tía Lucita, squares of lace to wear on their heads in church. Maybe La Vieja would not wear hers, liking instead her fringed black *rebozo*. But she would enjoy this gift, because it would be something to give when there was need for giving.

To the doctor Mario took a pen that would write without ink. For the boys in his class he bought a whole box of bubble gum, enough for everybody, including Mario. After much thought, and with the last of his money, he bought a box of modeling clay for Carlos, Carlos who had never been anywhere outside of Loreto.

Miss Hattie told Mario to pick out something for

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himself, "a thank-you for all those beautiful shells!"

Mario knew what he wanted. He had seen it every day in the hardware-store window. It was a knife with seven blades, each one different. A knife like that would make eleven years stretch taller than a man. With a knife like that one could clean a fish, or sharpen a pencil, or carve a saint. No one would ever shout, "Shark meat!" at the owner of a knife like that.

They returned to the supermarket to get some food for Miss Hattie.

"Pick out something to take down to La Vieja, Mario," she told him.

He chose a soft, white cheese, oranges, sugar rolls, and a bottle of the sweet brown sauce. He was surprised at how much of this he could ask for himself. He would not need to wait until tomorrow to learn to speak English.

As he paid the clerk with the money Tí 'Attie had handed him, he said with great heartiness, "Well, hi!"

"Hi, yourself! Pretty day."

"It sure is," answered Mario, proud that he could say what he meant in English.

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He knew enough now, he felt sure, to run errands for the Americans who came down to the lodge. He would study hard so he could do more work with Doctor Gabriel. He would learn to read fast so he could read all the books he needed to be a doctor. Not tomorrow, all this, Mario was thinking as he lifted the bag of groceries. Tomorrow never came. If you needed to learn something, it had to be today.

They flew down to Loreto in Miss Hattie's plane, stopping at Mexicali where Mario proudly showed his papers. Then down over the mountains until they reached the dark blue Sea of Cortez. An hour later they were swinging around above Loreto.

They came gently down to the runway and taxied over to the row of parked planes along the fence. Mario knew that these were the private planes of the fishermen who flew down to the Flying Sportsman's Lodge.

There at the gate was the car of Doctor Gabriel. The good doctor himself was hurrying over to welcome them.

"Mario!" Doctor Gabriel flung his arms around Mario, hugged him tight, patting his shoulder with

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his right hand. "My boy! My boy! Your return brings us new life."

"I have been away too long," said Mario in English and laughed at their surprise.

Mario and Miss Hattie climbed into the doctor's car and drove into Loreto.

"I do not think Loreto has changed much in two weeks," said Doctor Gabriel, his eyes twinkling behind his thick glasses.

"I don't think Loreto has changed much in two hundred years!" boomed Miss Hattie. "Mario is the one who has changed."

The doctor peered at Mario over his glasses. "I hope not too much. This would be a shock for La Vieja. Her life would be dull without a *bribón*, a rascal, to scold!"

Mario shrugged. "I do not think the hospital has much changed La Vieja. One learns not to listen."

As they drove down the street, people shouted greetings to Mario. "Hi, shark meat!" shrilled Carlos, ducking behind a tree outside the mission.

Mario grinned. He did not mind the teasing. Was he not returning from a long journey? Had he not traveled in a foreign country, with papers of permis-

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sion? Did he not have in his pocket a knife with seven blades?

Mario looked about at the few buildings, of adobe mostly, with palm-thatched roofs. He looked at the matched stone of the old church, built hundreds of years ago by the *padres* and the Indians. At the foot of the street, beyond the palm trees where the buzzards roosted, was the sea wall that guarded the town from the sea in the time of high winds. Beyond the blue line of the Gulf was the long ragged shape of Carmen Island.

It was good to come home from foreign lands to the things he knew.

At the hut of La Vieja the brown and white goats ran to meet them. The black goat, Negra, stood back, eying Mario with distant, amber eyes. Then, with a flick of her short tail, she daintily stepped aside. Cuddled in a nest of straw, between the roots of the old olive tree, were two fuzzy black kids. They sprang to their feet at the sight of the strangers. They danced, as light as leaves blowing in the wind, over to hide behind Negra. From this safety their tiny hard round heads, with slit eyes in sly faces, peeked out on either side.

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"Eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh!" bleated Negra importantly.

Mario shouted with joy. They are like toys, he thought, like the toys in the big store. But these were live toys, their coats as soft as silk, their tiny bodies full of steel-spring, wiry strength.

He hugged the black mother goat and made much of her. "I leave three goats," he said to Doctor Gabriel and Miss Hattie, "and I come home to five."

Miss Hattie knelt beside him to touch the tiny creatures. She was as pleased as Mario.

Mario's heart was bursting. Was he not a man of means, with such increase in his flock?

In the doorway of the hut stood La Vieja, a little more wrinkled, a little more bent. Her old eyes smiled on Mario, but her tongue was as sharp as ever. "Must you kneel then, struck dumb over a pair of kids, while you keep us waiting?"

From the town, on the clear air, came the clamor of church bells.

Mario heaved a long sigh. He was home. He was content.

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A Mexican Boy's Adventure

By

MARION GARTHWAITE

Illustrated by Ronni Solbert

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