

Twelve

Together Again

We knew our family would return from Mexico sometime in early April, but we did not know exactly what day. In the evenings we rushed home after work, hoping to see them. Each time we found an empty house we were disappointed, but hopeful and excited that the next day would be it.

We wanted to surprise them when they came home, so we frequented the public dump on early Saturday evenings to look for discarded paint and linoleum to brighten the inside of our house. We painted the kitchen and replaced the worn-out linoleum with new pieces of different colors and shapes, making the floor look like a quilt. In his wood-shop class, Roberto made a cupboard with a planter on top and filled it with plastic flowers. He placed it against the end of the kitchen sink, dividing the kitchen and dining area. Before going to school every morning, we made sure that the house was perfectly clean.

The long-awaited day finally arrived. It was early Sunday evening. Roberto and I were doing our homework at the kitchen table when we heard the dogs barking. We jumped up and ran out the door. A yellow cab came around the corner and parked in front. All four doors of the cab flew open like

the petals of a flower. I went around the front of the car to the other side, where Papá and Mamá stood with open arms. I felt like a child running to them. I did not know whom to hug first. Papá gave me a kiss on the forehead, the first kiss he had ever given me. Trampita, Rorra, and Torito jumped up and down and ran around Papá, Mamá, Roberto, and me, in a circle, laughing hysterically, touching our legs and bumping into one another. The cab driver stood leaning against the rear bumper, waiting for Papá to pay him. Roberto and I unloaded the cardboard boxes from the trunk and ran into the house, anxious to show Papá and Mamá what we had done.

“It’s beautiful, mijo!” Mamá said, looking all around at the brightly painted kitchen, the colorful floor, and the cupboard with plastic flowers.

“This must have been expensive,” Papá said, running his hands across the wood.

“I didn’t buy it. I made it at school,” Roberto responded proudly.

“So they teach you this at school? That’s good, mijo. Maybe you’ll be a carpenter.”

“Like Saint Joseph,” Mamá said. “I’d like that.”

“Tell us about Mexico,” Roberto said, trying to draw the attention away from himself.

“We will in a minute,” Mamá answered, “but first, we have a surprise for you.” She kneeled and opened one of the cardboard boxes and pulled out a small statue of the Santo Niño de Atocha. “This is for you, Roberto.”

My brother was awed and speechless. He grabbed the statue firmly with both hands, making sure not to drop it. He examined it from top to bottom and side to side. “Thank you, Mamá,” he said, teary-eyed. “He cured you when you were sick,” Roberto said, turning to Torito and handing him the statue.

“I know,” Torito said, reaching out to hold it.

“It was a miracle,” I said, remembering how Mamá had made Torito an outfit just like the one the Holy Child Jesus wore in a picture prayer card Papá carried in his wallet. We all prayed to the Santo Niño until my brother got well.

“And for you, Panchito, we got you this new bust of Jesus Christ to replace the one that’s chipped,” she said. “It’s smaller, but nicer.”

I took it carefully and gave Mamá a hug. The ceramic piece was the suffering face of Christ wearing a crown of thorns made from sharp nails. Blood dripped from his forehead and his sad eyes looked upward in prayer. It made me feel sad.

After we told them about school and work, Papá began to tell us about their stay in Mexico. “We had some ups and downs,” Papá said, lighting up a Camel cigarette. “It was hard on your

tía Chana. She and her family don't have much, but they made us feel at home. With the money you sent us, we helped out with groceries, but it was rough at times."

"If it hadn't been for you boys, I don't know what we would have done," Mamá said. She sighed and continued. "But the kids had a good time, except for Trampita . . ."

"I was hit by a bus," Trampita blurted out.

"He wasn't paying attention," Papá said, giving him a stern look for interrupting. "He was playing ball with his cousins out in the street. Luckily, he was not seriously hurt, but it scared us."

Trampita grinned and shrugged his shoulders sheepishly.

"Papá has some more good news!" Mamá said excitedly.

"Remember how Papá suffered from back pain? Well, you tell them, viejo."

Papá chuckled and stood up straight. "See, my back is much better." He sat down and continued. "I am cured. A curandera took care of me. She discovered I had been hexed."

"Really?" I said, recalling Doña María, a curandera in Tent City who tried to cure Torito when he was sick. There was something about her that made me nervous.

"How did she find out?" Roberto asked.

“I went to her hut in the outskirts of Tlaquepaque. It was like the garage we lived in in Selma. It had a dirt floor and no electricity. Behind it was a corral where she raised chickens and pigs. In one corner of the hut was a small table covered in black cloth. In the opposite corner was an altar with the Virgen de Guadalupe. It was surrounded with small, lit candles, pieces of clothing, wreaths, dried flowers, burning incense, and holy cards. We sat at the table facing each other and drank bitter tea that made me sleepy. She then had me strip to my waist and lie face down on a straw mat. She massaged my back with raw eggs and chanted in Huichol. I understood one or two words because your grandmother used to speak it. I fell into a deep sleep. When I woke up, I was soaked in sweat and my face was in the middle of a thick pool of blood, covered with mucus. It had a foul smell, like dead flesh. She told me I had vomited it during my sleep.”

“Maybe she put it there while you were asleep,” I said.

“Sounds like you don’t believe me, mijo, but it’s true.” Papá sounded annoyed.

“I bet the devil had something to do with it,” Roberto said. “When you were very sick in Corcoran, Papá, I saw the devil in the glass of water you kept next to your bed.”

“I thought the glass of water was to keep evil spirits away,” I said.

“You don’t believe I saw the devil?” Roberto said, raising his voice and making a face at me.

“I am not sure,” I answered hesitantly. “Maybe you imagined it. Besides, how do we know he really exists?”

“You’d better believe, or else . . .”

“Don’t say it,” Mamá interrupted. “The point is Papá is feeling better, and we should thank God for it.”

We continued late into the night, catching up on all the things we had done during the time we were apart. That night, before I went to bed, I prayed and thanked God our family was back together again. I placed the bust of Jesus Christ underneath my pillow and fell asleep.