

In his latest novel, MARIA JUANA'S GIFT, T. Lloyd Winetsky explores the frustration and heartbreak of preventable human medical error. Set during America's Bicentennial, it is the story of a young teaching couple fighting for the survival of their infant daughter born in a hospital on the Arizona-Mexico border. The novel's theme approaches the core of inhumanity but also celebrates a "gift" the couple will treasure for the rest of their lives.

María Juana's Gift

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MARÍA JUANA'S
GIFT



A NOVEL BY
T. LLOYD WINETSKY

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Although there are some real places and historical events referred to in this novel, the towns of La Cholla and Sofia are inventions. The characters in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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1

The old woman was less than five feet tall and not even a nurse's aide, but it was obvious to Jake that she knew what she was doing. One moment he would see Maria carrying out heavy bags of trash, and minutes later he observed her holding the baby with an authority and tenderness that gave him some hope.

He watched her now, but the pink blanket in her arms didn't move—no wiggling, no crying, and Maria had stopped acting as if the baby were responsive. Jake and his student who lived with them, Ben, had just visited Tina for a few minutes in her room at the end of the ward. Her reticence led Ben to excuse himself to wait in the truck.

Jake knocked lightly on the nursery window so he could talk to Maria, who was returning the baby to the incubator for more oxygen. She met him at the glass door, leaning on it hard because of pressure from the air conditioning; Jake pulled it open for her.

Maria's pale-brown face was drawn and grave. "*¿Señor Fren, el doctor?*" she asked him in Spanish.

Frowning, Jake told her he hadn't found him.

"*Señor, la niña, she is worse. She breathes faster.*" She pointed up at the speaker near the ceiling. "*I heard there was an emergency; the doctor came.*"

"What? *¿Cuándo, señora?*"

"*Maybe a half-hour.*"

"I'll be damned," Jake mumbled to himself, already hurrying away from the nursery into the hall toward the small emergency area. He passed the closed administrator's office and saw the door to the doctors' lounge was ajar. Jake stopped, opened it and called, "Hello?" A dark suit coat and blue tie were draped over the top of a leather recliner; he assumed the clothes were Serna's. Jake left and turned a corner, but he had to stop to keep from colliding with a custodian who was dry-mopping.

"See the doctor go by here?" Jake asked.

The heavy man, a bit startled by this unexpected redhead in a beard, baseball cap and Bermudas, finally said, "*El doctor*, he go."

"*Gracias, señor.*" Jake hopped over the wide broom and ran to the bench by the back door where many times in the last day he waited futilely, trying to catch the doctor when he left.

Jake went right out into a blast of dry, hundred-degree air to the nearly empty staff parking area. He ran around the corner of the hospital and saw the vintage white Corvette convertible easily take the steep hill, a passenger in the seat next to Doctor Serna.

"Damn it!" Jake shouted, not far from the grey stone face of Mary holding baby Jesus. He ran for the visitors' parking lot and could already see Ben, waiting in the front seat of Jake's old truck.

Doctor Serna and his cousin, the mayor, had no idea someone was pursuing them; the doctor's high-powered engine easily conquered another incline while several blocks back Jake's forty-horse motor strained, balking like a mule.

The Corvette disappeared from Jake's sight; he yanked his gearshift all the way down to second. "Crap, Loretta," he grumbled to the dual-cab Volkswagen he had been refurbishing for years. *Swear to God, you're sold if the damn doctor gets away.*

"¿*Maestro?*" the teen said, a quiver in his voice.

"It's okay, Ben, I just need to talk to the jerk." *And take him back.*

The pickup slugged onward past some carbon-copy three-bedroom ramblers up to the summit where the afternoon sun struck Jake in the eyes. He reached for the visor, forgetting he had yet to repair it, and instead pulled down the brim of his Chicago Cubs cap. Ben blocked the glare with his arm.

Three blocks ahead at a stop sign, he could see the doctor's Panama hat and the mayor's bald head. To Jake, they looked like tourists at the border, basking in the sun as if it were provided by the gods just for them. He hoped they would stop at the doctor's office, but Serna drove by well above the speed limit.

He's going home, Jake thought, but the Corvette didn't turn into La Cholla Gardens, where the doctor lived. *The schmuck's heading to town.* "Hold on!" he called out to Ben.

His student's dark skin blanched a shade as Jake ran the stop sign. Ben ducked, slouching his gaunt frame below the windowsill. On the down slope, Jake accelerated almost to fifty, the trees and houses blurring by.

"*Maestro*, you leave me here?"

"What?" *He saw someone back there.* "Okay—this next hill, when I have to slow down."

"*Está bien.*"

The truck hit the incline and started to labor; Jake released the gas pedal, stopping their forward motion. He yanked the hand brake to keep from rolling back, and saw the passenger door was already open. Ben jumped out, waved, and ran down an alley; Jake struggled on up the hill in first gear.

At the next summit, he saw his prey had lengthened the lead to about a half-mile, but Jake was less than a hundred yards behind by the time he sped down to level ground near the fruit warehouse at the outskirts of La Cholla. Doctor Serna parked behind a ceremonial black and white '51 Ford squad car at the head of a line of disparate vehicles.

Oh yeah, the friggin' parade. Two Cadillacs idled behind the Corvette, then a fire engine, six antique autos full of war veterans, a farm tractor pulling a hay wagon swarming with Brownie scouts, and four teams of Little Leaguers in station wagons. Eight horses followed, mounted by glittering Mexican *charros* in wide *sombreros*, then came a hobo clown with a shovel cart, and a tiny red Nash Metropolitan stuffed with three more clowns—one red, one white, and one blue. Every child held a patriotic helium balloon, and some of the adults had dressed up as sons or daughters of the Revolution.

The high-school band was near the end, thirty strong, in stifling, clashing black-and-orange uniforms. The teens stood in the shade by a semi's trailer, sullenly unpacking instruments in front of a green tractor that pulled the town float. Sitting up there on star-spangled stairs beneath a white umbrella, the stout 1976 Miss La Cholla primed her puffy black coiffure, gazing into a pocket mirror. The town's tall yellow street sweeper, draped in flag bunting, was the last in line. Its driver, impatient for the parade to begin, was making the square vehicle spin slowly in place like a robot.

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There were no curbs this far from downtown, so Jake just pulled off the road by some other cars near the fruit warehouse, not far from Miss La Cholla. He got out of his truck, then ran in starts and stops toward the front of the queue, not noticing a police car slowly following him a half-block behind.

As Jake dodged around participants and gawkers, he recalled that the parade would cross the border and loop through old La Cholla. *No wonder nobody's marching; they don't want to get stuck in Mexico.*

He passed the clowns, who were opening boxes of goodies to throw to the kids—baseball card packs on this side, then athletic socks and hard candy below the border. Jake saw some citizens fooling around with bunting and a sign for the doctor's car: GRAND MARSHALL—MAYOR "RICO" RANGEL. *The mayor can just find another damn driver.*

Sixteen months before the parade in La Cholla, Jake gazed out at a sign in San Diego—OLD TOWN BAKERY AND PANADERIA. He was thinking that some warm *pan dulce* with margarine melted on top sounded good. Fog and the evening rush hour had extended their trip to nearly three hours.

Armando drove two more blocks, circled another, and turned the school district sedan into a parking lot. Except for snoring from the two veteran female teachers in the back, the last fifteen minutes of the drive were quiet; Jake and Armando had run out of things to talk about.

The uneven black letters on the bright sign outside the hotel read, **WELCOME mIG/Biling Ed/eSI**, adding to Jake's certainty that his third dreary state conference wouldn't affect anything important in his life.

"Why the frown, Skip?" *Skip* was a recent addition to Armando's exuberant vocabulary, but Jake didn't mind. The fledgling teacher was doing well in their alternative classroom for secondary migrant students, though the previous summer Jake had to convince his principal to hire Armando.

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“Not frowning,” Jake said, intentionally loud enough to wake the women. Armando parked; they all got out and entered the lobby with light baggage. The hotel had already begun to decorate for the Bicentennial—nothing elaborate yet, just a tall poster of a smirking George Washington and some strings of tiny U.S. flags around the door of the small gift shop.

While Armando and the two rumpled women checked out the tourist junk, Jake handled the purchase order. He made sure their room was far away from “the two ol’ bags,” as Armando referred to them. The four teachers then registered at the conference table, all but Jake obediently pinning on a two by four-inch rainbow-bordered name badge.

At the third floor, the women glared at Armando before leaving the elevator; the young teacher shrugged and punched the “7” button. Predictably, he and Jake looked up at the indicator as they passed the fourth floor.

Armando Tapia had chestnut-colored skin and dense, raven hair that matched his brows, moustache and long sideburns. Unlike his mentor six feet away, Armando’s regular smile gave the impression he was content even when he wasn’t. He and Jake had one physical similarity, they were both two inches or so shy of six feet tall.

Jake, a “fat kid” through puberty, developed in his early twenties a preference for walking and biking whenever he could, but the benefits of his exercise sometimes lost out to a daily “beer or two.” Now almost twenty-six, his waist had a two-inch fold of adipose; he outweighed lean Armando by about thirty pounds.

A shade darker than a classic redhead, Jake was fair but didn’t look blushed, and his constellations of freckles faded over the years. His slowly receding hair and a sporadically trimmed full beard had darkened from rufous red almost to brown. Jake’s most obvious feature, thick auburn eyebrows, furrowed, arched or flattened with any serious thought that crossed his mind.

Both men waited for the elevator in garb typical of what they wore in class—Armando in pressed half-belled blue jeans, black loafers and a brightly printed shirt; Jake in coarse suede shoes, dark-brown jeans and a short-sleeve light-blue dress shirt, never a tie.

The seventh-floor bell “dinged” and Jake turned to Armando, who carried one worn cardboard valise; his black guitar case stood next to him on the elevator floor.

“Far enough away, are we?” Jake asked, grinning.

“Yeah, Skip, thanks. Those two would cramp my style for sure. We’re not eating dinner with them, right?”

“We’re on our own,” he said as the door opened.

Armando twitched his rakish moustache and broadened his smile as he lifted the luggage. “The room’s still mine for tomorrow night; you’re at your brother’s, right?”

Jake hefted his grey canvas bag as they exited, searching for numbers. “My cousin’s.” He turned a corner. “You’re *that* sure you’re going to score?”

“If I don’t, there’s *mi guitarra*.” He raised the black case and “yipped” as if he were singing a *ranchera*.

“Jesus, don’t get us kicked out the first night.”

Armando put a forefinger over his lips. “Got it, Skip, play it cool.”

They walked ahead, reading door numbers. “Where did you come up with *Skip*?” Jake asked.

“That’s what we called our coach. You’re the Skip of our little team, man.”

“Great.” They turned down a hall. “So, you’ll be trying to date a teacher?”

“You nuts? If they’re not old like those two,” he pointed down, “they act like ’em. I’ll be checking out teacher’s aides. What about you?”

“No, different perspective. The women here are too young, too married, or still into Elvis.”

“You gotta be lookin’ for something.”

“Yeah, I found it.” Jake pointed at room 725; Armando already had his key out; he opened the door and rushed in. All the lights were on by the time Jake plopped his bag on the first of two queen beds.

Armando drew back the white curtains. “This is perfect, Skip; check out the view.”

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Jake looked out at downtown San Diego. The fog had lifted to overcast; a flashing airliner seemed to be making a suicidal descent right between glimmering office buildings.

"Damn, how can they do that?" Armando said, not expecting an answer. The room itself had the typical small coffee pot, plastic ice bucket, and sterile wrapped glasses. On the wall above the dresser, a metal-framed print portrayed a generic sailboat on the ocean that was actually several miles from the hotel.

Jake smiled. "First time this high, Mister Tapia?"

"Yup, this beats those dumps on Highway 99. Let's see how the TV works." Armando lifted a boxy remote control attached to the nightstand.

The news came on, the announcer blaring, "...Revere's kitchen table in 1775—your Bicentennial Minute for Wednesday, February twenty-sixth, nineteen seventy-five."

"I can't wait to learn the name of Paul Revere's horse," Jake said.

"Yeah, let's eat. I'm starved." Armando muted the sound and checked some other channels.

"Do you want to go out or eat downstairs?"

"Downstairs—easy pickin's." He turned off the TV.

Jake looked at him askance but didn't care enough to ask what he meant. After they washed up, Armando put on a white Filipino shirt; Jake didn't change. About ten minutes later, they entered a half-occupied restaurant decorated with fishing nets, blue glass floats, swords and seahorses. They stood by a Neptune dummy that held a sign in the shape of a treasure chest: PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED.

"Where's your name tag, Skip?"

"In the room."

"It's okay, I've got mine." He patted his badge.

"So?" Jake replied just before a young peroxide-blonde hostess in a jaunty sailor cap walked up to them.

"Two?" she asked Armando.

"We're meeting some friends. If we don't find them," his smile widened, "maybe you could find us a table."

She literally flapped her artificial black lashes. "Anything I can do to help, sir."

They walked into the seating area; Armando half-winked back to her.

“Jesus, I think you already scored,” Jake murmured.

“Not really my type, but who knows?”

“I thought you didn’t want to eat with those two.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Armando scanned the diners as they walked. “We’ll eat alone before we do that.”

“Then who are you looking for?”

“We just passed a good possibility. Back, Skip.”

Jake turned and saw two women, not ten feet away, slightly slouched and reading their menus at a table set for five. They were both at least Armando’s age; one had medium-length curly brunet hair and strikingly dark oval eyes. To Jake, her attractiveness was compromised by ponderous silver earrings, a matching gaudy necklace, and the rank cigarette smoke she kept waving from her bronze face.

Armando started toward them; Jake lagged behind, thinking the second woman was unremarkable. She wasn’t homely or even plain, but her pale, serious, rounded features had no help at all from Revlon, and unlike her friend, she wore no jewelry. *Average looks, twenty-five at most; God, but look at that hair.* It was long and honey-blonde, natural, he decided, cascading by her slender neck and over her shoulders like clear water, even in the dimmed light. *She could pass for Amish—great.* Following Armando up to their table, Jake glanced at the rainbow badge on her buttoned-up white cardigan: ~~CHRISTINA~~ LINN, VISALIA, BILING ED. CERT., the first five letters struck through with black marker.

“Man, you guys are from Visalia? I’m from Fresno!” Armando blurted, slapping his conference badge. Christina Linn’s face was blank, but Jake noticed her eyes. They looked soft to him, and root-beer brown; he liked the contrast with her resplendent blonde hair. Jake couldn’t tell if she was bashful or angry, but he thought she deserved to be pissed off by the interruption.

“Fresno, no kidding?” the other woman said, as if it really were a coincidence. She smiled fetchingly; her breasts distended the badge on her white blouse: ORALIA MEDINA, VISALIA, TEACHING ASSISTANT. Oralia doused her smoke and presented long fingers and

crimson nails to Armando for a delicate handshake. "I'm Orie; this is Tina. You're a teacher?" she added, clearly impressed by his status.

"*Armando Tapia, a sus órdenes.*" He nodded to them, then away. "This is Jake; we team-teach in Lemon Branch. Would you ladies care for some dinner company?"

Orie grinned toward Tina, who raised her fair brows ambivalently. Jake stood there looking sheepish and wishing they had gone out for beers and Mexican food.

"Sit down; we're about to order," Orie said, snickering. "Tell us where Lemon Branch is." Armando sat on her other side, leaving Jake the chair between the two women.

"Lemon Branch, Orange County," Armando beamed, "just a hop from the Magic Kingdom." He bragged a minute about their program and then asked, "So you guys teach ESL?" Tina looked to Orie as the hostess arrived with more menus, giving Armando a surly glance.

"And some other things," Orie answered, still smiling.

The next hour was small talk over large margaritas. The conversation covered the dinner fare, Disneyland, the San Joaquin Valley and Tijuana, mostly two-way banter between Orie and *Mando*, who had confessed the nickname. As they ate, Tina mostly listened, Jake commented briefly and chuckled; Orie and Armando got louder by the time everyone had dessert. Jake was impressed that Tina understood when they switched to Spanish a few times. All but Tina started on a second margarita while Armando finished telling an energetic joke about seven retarded dwarves, all named Dopey, who couldn't figure out what to do with a willing Snow White.

Tina and Jake sat straight-faced.

Orie forced a smile. "Sorry, baby, but that's more cruel than funny."

Armando turned from her to Jake, who looked back at him with a laugh and said, "Don't look at me, *maestro*, she's right."

Armando slurred a little. "Yeah, guess so."

"Look, *Mando*," Orie said, "I didn't tell you we work with disabled kids—Bilingual Special Ed."

"Hey, I'm all for that," Armando said eagerly, "except when they dump kids in there just because they don't know English. Right, Skip?"

“Of course.” Jake made a half-smile.

Orie looked at Tina, then the garrulous teacher’s aide spoke for them again, this time proudly. “Tina doesn’t let that happen in our class. The kids need to have some learning problem besides English.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying.” Armando was pleased he had everyone in agreement. “Hey, my stupid joke got us talkin’ school—two whole days for that. Let’s order a drink; get into music or movies or something.” He had no takers for another round but still looked for the waitress.

“Okay,” Orie said, “let’s see, I just saw a John Wayne movie, *Micky-D*, something like that. Wasn’t very good, cops and robbers, but I do love his cowboy movies.”

Armando laughed at Jake. “Another vote for the Duke.”

Jake shook his head. “You heard the lady, he’s not even versatile enough to play a cop.”

“Ladies,” Armando said, pointing his thumb, “right here’s the only guy in the U.S.A. who doesn’t like John Wayne movies.”

“You don’t like his politics, Jake?” Orie asked.

“No, I don’t care about his opinions.”

Armando smirked. “Now you gotta explain, man.”

Her pretty eyes wide open, Orie waited for the explanation while Tina slanted her brow, looking puzzled.

“Okay, short and sweet. My dad was an actor—after work, weekends; I grew up around legit actors who love the stage. Hearing about movie stars all the time, you’d think L.A. would get used to it, but people treat them like gods. To me, they’re nothing unless they can act and don’t sell out—Gregory Peck, Katharine Hepburn, Brando; damn few others. John Wayne just plays himself; he’s a star, not an actor.” Embarrassed that he got so carried away, Jake was flushed.

Tina cleared her throat, creasing her forehead. “Uh, sorry, I don’t think I’ve heard of him.”

They all stared at her for a few seconds; Jake’s jaw felt unhinged. *What?*

“John Wayne?” Armando said, starting to snigger. “You *are* kidding, right, Tina?”

“No,” she answered quietly.

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Orie kept herself from laughing. "Tina, you've been here six months now; you must've heard of him back in college, or after that."

"No, I went from Kentucky right back to Africa."

Trying not to stare rudely, Jake said, "Africa?" *And no John Wayne?*

"Yes." Tina looked at him with a shrug and a very slight grin, transforming her face for a moment.

Jake saw her brief smile. *And damned if she isn't cute. What was her family doing over there? Diplomats? Doctors, maybe? How does she know Spanish?*

Armando, still chortling, was telling Tina how John Wayne was number one at the box office.

Orie jumped in. "Tina, get this, he's been married," she showed three fingers, "*tres veces, a tres hispanas.*"

Tina returned a diffident half-smile, again enchanting Jake, who watched her furtively while they filled Tina in on John Wayne's movies and his real name.

"Enough with the Duke," Armando finally said to Tina, still amused by her cultural naiveté. "I want to ask you about Jake's favorite singer; you gotta tell us the truth."

"All right," she said, looking down self-consciously.

"It's Elvis Presley." Armando's tone was gleeful. "You can't tell me you never heard of *him*."

She barely closed her eyes, like a long blink, showing a bit of pique. "Yes, I know about Elvis." Tina looked at Jake apologetically. "I don't like his music very much."

"Bingo!" Armando shouted, then laughed. "Tina, before he starts telling you how much Elvis sucks, have you ever heard of—?"

"That's enough, *Mando*," Orie broke in, eyes daggered. Her interruption barely precluded one from Jake, who looked at Orie appreciatively.

Armando put his arms up like in a movie stick-up. "Okay, okay, sorry. Relax, everybody; the night is young."

Orie yawned. "Not for me it isn't. We drove half of California and shopped all of *Tijuana*—afraid I've had it."

Armando stood, his mind working on a way to finish his move on Orié. “Should I order coffee?” He searched for the waitress again.

Orié smiled, shaking her head. “Not before bed, baby.”

Either *bed* or *baby* seemed to put Armando in a frenzy; he sat again, proposing to play her some music.

Jake smiled at Tina, who attempted to ignore Armando’s nearby pleading. Before Orié could end the conversation with Armando, Jake tried to summon his nerve. *What the hell, give it a shot; ask her.*

Fifteen minutes later, Jake and Armando sat at the small table in their room and looked out, this time at a propjet flying even more precariously past the modest skyscrapers of San Diego. Jake had picked up two beers downstairs; they sipped from the cans, watching the view.

“Look at that crap,” Armando said. “I’m never goin’ up there.”

Jake scoffed. “You’ll fly before you’re twenty-five.”

“Feeling pretty smart, aren’t you, Skip?” His question was rhetorical. “Man, I can’t believe it; you score for tomorrow night, and I strike out.”

“Yeah,” Jake replied, needling him, “I think I could’ve had a date with either one of them.”

“You’re getting carried away now, man.” Armando shook his head. “I never would’ve guessed Orié’s three years older than me.”

“Like she wasn’t surprised by *your* age?”

“I shoulda’ faked it. It was goin’ good until then.”

Jake couldn’t hold back a snicker. “Yeah, maybe so.”

“It isn’t funny. I heard that line you used on Tina: *¿Le gusta los mariscos?* That’s horrible, and way too formal. She probably hates seafood, but she bought it anyway. She’s into you, man.”

Jake tried not to smile at that reassuring news. “And how do you know that?”

“Shit, I know. So, you take the room tomorrow night.”

“And scare her off? No, I like her.”

“Jesus, aren’t you the guy who was going to the border to check out the *putas?*”

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Jake's light complexion reddened a shade. "We were just going down there for, uh—"

"Yeah, yeah," Armando interrupted. "Won't your date mess up the deal with your cousin?"

"I'll call him; stay there on Friday night. The room will be yours."

"Works for me." Armando stood up. "I'm gonna brush my teeth, get the ol' *guitarra*, and head downstairs for the social."

Jake grinned. "Back on the trail?"

Armando started across the room. "Yup. You coming?"

"Nah, I'm finished for one night."

"Tina's cool, Skip; and I know you dig that hippie hair, but you just met her." Armando laughed, stopping near the bathroom. "You sound like an ol' married man."

"Yeah, sure. Just go have fun, *Mando*," Jake chided.

"I will; bank on it," he called back from the sink.

Regardless of the joking around, Jake thought about what Armando said, admitting to himself that he didn't know Tina at all. *You're acting like a smitten adolescent*. He looked out the window at the lights, finishing his beer. *Then again, she seems like one of a kind*.

2

Sweat pouring from his forehead, Jake approached the doctor and mayor in the Corvette; they laughed to each other about something. The mayor had donned a ridiculous white ten-gallon Stetson; his gut jiggled where it hung below his red cowboy shirt. The school band cut loose with a discordant blast of *It's a Grand Old Flag*, the horses jittering from the clamor.

Jake tapped the back of the sleeve of the doctor's red-and-blue-striped white summer shirt. "Doctor Serna!" he shouted over the racket.

The young doctor turned around with a wide smile; the portly mayor was shaking hands with Ben Franklin and simultaneously leering at a comely Betsy Ross. Serna distorted his light-brown face into a squint and removed the Panama hat to block the sun, revealing a full head of neat hair, dark and reflective as plain coffee.

"Oh, uh, Mister Friend," the doctor called out. "It's good you finally got out of there—happy Fourth."

The band's practice medley was now on *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, so Jake and the doctor had to keep yelling.

"I'm not here for the parade, doctor; you know I've been trying to reach you. I want you to come with me to the hospital." Jake pointed back. "I'm parked just over there."

"What? I don't think so, Mister Friend." His smile vanished only for a moment.

"My daughter, doctor, she—"

"Listen, she's in good hands. Now please leave me to enjoy my Sunday," Serna said, not as loud. He turned away and put on his hat, assuming the matter was finished.

"*You* listen," Jake shouted just as the bandmaster signaled for immediate silence, "our baby's sick!" Those within twenty yards of the Corvette stopped yammering to gawp at Jake and the doctor.

"Jesus, man, shut up." Serna spoke under his breath through a toothy grin, looking around as if Jake were not there. After a few

silent, awkward moments, the parade participants mumbled, and then resumed the loud gabbing.

The doctor spoke to Jake again, still without eye contact. “All right, spit it out; keep your voice down.”

“Fine. Yesterday the nurse told me something wasn’t right with Emma; I’ve been trying to catch you ever since.”

Serna finally looked at him. “That was *you* at my house again? This is getting ridiculous,” he added in a low grumble. “All right, here’s the deal, Mister Friend.”

Teeth clenched, Jake glowered at him. “Go on.”

“I came back yesterday for morning rounds and checked them both; they were fine. I’m sure you’ve been told since then that the baby’s levels are normal.”

“Have *you* been told that McNally isolated her, put her on oxygen, and she’s still breathing too fast?”

“I heard about the oxygen,” he said with a trace of a scoff. “My senior colleague was taking precautions.”

“He was trying to help. You could’ve come by and checked her when you were there this morning.”

“Mister Friend,” he said, smiling and snarling at once. “I was taken out of mass for an emergency that *wasn’t*. I’ll see your wife and baby on regular rounds first thing tomorrow.”

Jake shook his head. “No, that’s not good enough.”

“What? Who do you think you are?” The doctor caught his rising tone mid-sentence and smiled at a Minuteman walking by. Serna turned, glaring at Jake. “Who said she was worse, that old lady?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“For God’s sake, man, her job is to change diapers and clean up. You couldn’t understand her, anyway.”

“I speak Spanish, Doctor.”

“Doesn’t matter. These people think she’s, uh...a cure-a-dera—whatever they call it.”

“*Curandera*. What matters is that María knows the baby’s sick.”

“Ridiculous. The charge nurse would’ve contacted me if there was a real problem.”

“She said you were too busy.”

“Exactly right; she deserves a raise.” He waved to three tardy band members.

“My wife knows something’s wrong; she just stares at Emma when they bring her.”

“Mister Friend, your baby is big and healthy, and your wife is uh, stoic, like these wet—uh, migrants.”

Schmuck. “I know my wife; she *should* have been crying.” Jake tried to calm himself. “Look, I’m just asking you to go and take another look at Emma. If we’re wrong about this, you’ll have my personal apology.”

“You know where I’m going? To old La Cholla.”

Overhearing his cousin, the mayor stopped glad-handing and swiveled his thick neck. “Is there a problem, Eddie?”

“Nah, Rico, he’s just leaving.”

Jake opened the door of the Corvette part way. “I am, and I’m still asking you to come with me. The cops can drive him.”

“Last time, Mister Friend,” Serna said through his teeth again, “I’m not going to the hospital.”

Jake prepared for the first day of the convention by cutting up a paper sack to cover the novel he was reading. He woke up Armando, showered, and then got dressed in the same pants with a clean white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He put on his badge because it also served as the lunch ticket. Jake headed for the elevator with his book and the conference folder.

Downstairs, the educators were assembling for continental breakfast in the hallway outside the cavernous main room that would host the keynote speech. The corridor was wall-to-wall with conventioners jabbering while nibbling from plastic plates held in one hand. Some of them carried their belongings in SAN DIEGO or TIJUANA shopping bags.

Jake figured about three-fourths of them were teachers, mostly women, but he wasn’t surprised to see men who were very much into

María Juana's Gift

“Sunny San Diego,” wearing Bermuda shorts and florid short-sleeve shirts, although it was again a cool day.

Their mean age, he guessed, was around thirty-five, mostly born during World War II. Sometimes only a few years his senior, Jake thought many of them belonged to a society whose day had passed; he dismissed their generation as the last one that would grow old with the champagne music of Lawrence Welk. He believed the majority had ignored the sixties and were now chiefly motivated by acquisition or greed. Most egregious of all, he concluded that for way too many of these teachers, students were a low priority.

After seeing one man make a spectacle of himself with an oversized souvenir *sombrero*, Jake looked for Tina at the breakfast tables. He found Armando; the two of them sat through a self-congratulatory keynote address by a man named Muñoz, a high-level bureaucrat in federal education.

Following the speech, Jake spotted Tina in the hall making coffee; he started over to her. She seemed an inch or two shorter than he recalled from the night before, probably about five-five. She wore sleek dark slacks and a different cardigan, this one was pink and buttoned only at the bottom; he couldn't help but notice that her breasts formed a nice taught line in her white blouse. Tina carried an over-the-shoulder purse larger than a grocery sack, printed in three vertical colors—green, red, and yellow, with a yellow star at the middle of the red band.

She doesn't look Amish today. He walked quickly the rest of the way. “Morning, Tina.”

She looked up with an unimposing smile, but to him it was radiant. Tina read his badge.

“Morning, Jake. Your last name is Friend?”

He noticed her faintly penciled brows. “Afraid so.”

“Is that an unusual name?”

“Not really; I'll tell you its fascinating story tonight when we have some time.”

They quickly firmed up their plans to taxi out for seafood, but Jake worried that she sounded unenthused, even for her. He hoped Armando was right, maybe she just didn't like fish; later he could suggest

something else. They arranged to meet again during the second break in a room provided for publishers to display their books.

Jake's first session was a mandatory one on Migrant Health, which turned out to be even more of a waste of time than he expected. His book hidden in the conference folder, Jake started to read, chuckling at the story once so loud that the presenter stared him down.

After the hour droned to a close, Jake walked to the coffee tables, hoping to run into Tina. His next session was flexible; he could choose from anything, even Bilingual Special Ed. Jake perused the schedule and looked around for her at the same time, oblivious of the goofy smile on his face. He poured coffee and cheerily greeted a male server, who told him, "I can see, sir, I don't need to wish *you* a happy day."

Embarrassed, he left for a presentation by Armando's favorite teacher at Fresno State. To Jake, Professor Rivera, a small man with a black Wyatt Earp moustache, passionately stated the obvious: "When our kids walk through that door, they bring the language and culture they learned at their mother's breast. Our schools often treat it like a deficit, sometimes even for kids who are literate in their own language. The latest name for this is *English immersion*, an insidious idea that assumes the brain of a second language learner is *tabula rasa*, a blank slate.

"Immersion is actually the drowning of our student's language, and it is taught by many Anglos *and* Latinos. The good news is I'm about to show you how some English teachers honor the home culture, and I don't mean *piñatas* and Taco Tuesdays. Now, if I've ruffled feathers, you're still welcome to stay. Those who can't handle my spiel, I'll make it easy and fix my overhead. Have a nice life." He turned away; three Latinos and four Anglos left the packed room. From Jake's perspective, they missed out on what was the most practical workshop in three conventions.

At the break, Jake was waiting to talk to Rivera when he remembered Tina and hustled downstairs. He saw her on the far side of the room, chatting with Orié and some other women near a publisher's table. Wondering what he might learn by watching her for a moment, Jake stopped.

Tina listened intently or courteously but didn't respond once while Jake watched. He noticed the women all had some kind of curled or processed hair while Tina's, now in full light, seemed even more lustrous than the night before. He broke his reverie and approached them.

As he came closer, Jake heard Orié say, "Here's Jake, Tina, you can find out about that session."

He stiffened his face, consciously trying to hide the physical manifestation of his crush on Tina, what Jake would call a *shit-faced grin*. "What session?" he asked matter-of-factly, but she reacted with one of her reserved smiles, melting Jake's resolve into a display of all his front teeth. Before Tina could speak, some kind of body language passed from Orié to the others, sending the women on their way, half of them giggling. Tina blushed as she removed the convention folder from her huge woven purse.

Jake was determined to be more upbeat after his rant about John Wayne. "I like your purse," was all he could come up with.

"Thanks. That lady laughed at it, said it was a *Hate-Azberry* bag. Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, Haight-Ashbury's a neighborhood in Frisco. She meant a hippie bag." Jake scowled. "*Pendeja*," he added under his breath.

"What did you call her?"

"Sorry, my L.A. Spanish."

"C'mon, Jake, I need to know the bad words."

"*Pendejo*—uh, pubic hair. It's used like *jerk*, a tad stronger."

"Oh," she said in a bland tone. "And, uh, *Frisco* is San Francisco?"

"Yeah, only in L.A." Jake smiled. "They don't appreciate it up north."

"I see. You must think I'm pretty slow."

"I do not." He didn't disguise very well how much he disagreed. *New subject, Jake*. He pointed at her purse. "Is that design from an African flag?"

"Yes, Cameroon." Tina looked into her folder. "This is the session, Jake. I think it's one of yours."

Tina moved beside him, pointing at the schedule and accidentally brushing his forearm. The light touch of her soft skin scintillated him

like the first time he held hands in junior high; he couldn't focus on the words.

"Which one again?" he asked, sounding annoyed.

"You okay?" Tina answered, touching the page.

Don't be pathetic, Jake. "Yeah, fine. Uh, the NMAS update? Yes, it's mandatory for me—two hours, probably the driest sessions here. You're going?"

"After reading this, I was hoping they could somehow help me get my student records sooner."

"What?" Jake chuckled. "Oh, *do* come along; you'll never have to waste your time on it again." They walked around scores of educators gabbing at full volume, and then moved down the hall, heading for the staircase to the second floor where most of the presentations took place.

Starting up the wide stairs, Jake remembered their earlier chat. "Uh, Tina, do you really like seafood?"

"Yes, but I've had my quota of fancy restaurants."

"Okay. Maybe we'll just wait until later and see what sounds good." She returned another demure smile, all the answer he needed.

They entered the same room Jake was in earlier for Migrant Health, but the partition was moved to accommodate about thirty rows of the hotel's ubiquitous scarlet-red, padded convention chairs—stacked in some rooms up to the low ceilings.

Behind and above the long table at front, there was a ten-foot white plastic banner, professionally produced with an enlarged version of the same colorful logo that graced the convention badges—a family of six light-skinned, grinning Latino farm workers, the parents and two young children in work clothes, proudly holding up green stalks. A male teen stood at one end of the family, a female at the other, each wearing a mortarboard and holding a diploma. Above the logo it read:

NMAS
NATIONAL MIGRANT ARCHIVE SYSTEM
Jacksonville, Florida

Jake led Tina to almost the last row, where they sat and watched a middle-aged black woman in glasses and a red suit pull a screen down

over the banner; all you could see then was NATIONAL and SYSTEM. The large room was about a third full, a few stragglers walking in.

“This is the *real* fun part,” he said to Tina, who was reading from the ten-page handout. Jake had already skimmed the pages, stuffed them away and was now situating his novel behind the flaps of the convention folder.

In a southern drawl, the presenter asked someone to lower the lights halfway; she turned on her projector and faced the audience. This was the third time Jake had to listen to her; to him, she resembled Shirley Chisholm, the congresswoman who ran for President. *She sure doesn't sound like her; certainly isn't as smart.*

The lady welcomed them then wasted five minutes saying she only had an hour to cover a lot of material. She pre-scolded everyone and said, “...questions are to be saved for the panel in the second hour.” Though most of the audience was experienced with migrant forms, she insisted that some changes made a complete review necessary. After she proceeded to remind everyone that a student's last name must be written over “LAST,” a few participants began to disappear for feigned potty breaks. Tina turned to him; Jake was even charmed by the slight scowl she made toward the presenter. As the lady from NMAS continued with one inanity after another, Jake opened his book.

“What are you reading?” Tina whispered without looking at him, like a kid cheating on a test.

“*Milagro Beanfield War*,” he murmured. “About a guy named Joe *Mondragón*, and his pinto beans. Hilarious, but it really has—”

“Excuse me, sir,” the presenter said. “If you're discussing form Two-B, kindly do it more quietly or wait for the panel.” Several severe faces turned back to Jake.

“Oh, sorry, right, I'll do that.” He grinned to Tina. She propped the conference folder on her lap and extracted needles and yarn from her purse. Tina shrugged and started crocheting; Jake went back to his book, thinking about her; it took minutes for the words on the page to mean anything.

During the break, he answered a couple questions Tina had about the forms. After a bathroom visit, they returned to the room five

minutes late for the second hour. The NMAS banner was visible again; most of the audience was back from the first hour as well as some new people, including a cosmopolitan-looking group of NMAS officials settling in behind the front table, all of them in suits.

A tall man at the podium said he was Manuel Barajas, Director of California NMAS. Jake thought he could pass for a Mormon missionary in his crew cut, dark suit, black tie and white socks. The man thanked the Shirley Chisholm look-alike; Jake knew they had heard the last from her. Barajas welcomed the panel: two Hispanic men and two women, one Asian and one Anglo. After the first three panelists explained their roles in California, the fourth, a chalky-faced woman whose husky frame strained the seams of her fastidious brown suit, said she was Ida Swanson, the National Director of NMAS from Jacksonville.

Tina took out a spiral notebook, looking surprised that Jake was attentive to the panel.

“Let’s see if anyone asks a real question,” he whispered to her. The director concisely answered three inquiries about the migrant forms; not even pretending that her assistant had adequately explained the same topics in the first hour. Jake shook his head, then occupied himself by doodling and retracing a short phrase on his folder.

Two rows away, a tall, bearded man in a tweedy sport coat raised his hand and stood, identifying himself as an administrator from the Imperial Valley. “My question is also for Ms. Swanson,” he said, prefixing her name in the latest fashion. “NMAS has been up and running now a few years; when do you expect the system will be of any *real* use for teachers who work with migrant students?” Jake saw some of the audience turn and sneer at Imperial Valley as if he had crashed a party. Jake and a couple others lightly applauded in support of the question. Eyes open wide, Tina looked around, gauging the friction in the room as Ida Swanson cleared her throat to answer.

“Thank you for the question,” Ida said over her glasses, folds forming in her chubby neck. “Since you’ve already decided that the system is useless, sir, please tell me what doesn’t work.”

“Nothing works,” he said, “and the fact you don’t know, speaks volumes.” In response to the man’s criticism, grumbles rippled across the audience.

Ida Swanson smirked, knowing she had the support of most of those present. “Since you offer no specifics, sir, is there anyone here who can explain how *nothing* works with NMAS?” This time a wave of sniggers passed through the room as educators looked around for someone foolish enough to disparage the agency that paid part of their salaries. No one spoke up right away, but as Swanson looked like she was about to go on, Jake got to his feet.

“Yes, sir,” she said confidently, assuming Jake would start a new topic. “Your question, please?”

“The same as his; I’ll give you some specifics. My name’s Jake Friend, I teach in Orange County; this is my third year of watching your records fill up our file cabinets. They arrive a month to six months after the students, if they come at all. The records that do get there are blank or inaccurate or out-of-date; to put it plainly, useless.”

“With all due respect,” Ida countered, “I believe you’re exaggerating, sir. In fact, our main goal this year is to improve outgoing data by holding nationwide in-services to help schools send out information properly.”

Jake was shaking his head. “Yeah, you sent one of our elementary school secretaries to L.A.”

“Yes, she will need to share the information with the other secretaries. As you know, her main job is to get educational information from teachers, combine it with health and other student data, and then send it off to us.”

“No, her *main* job is to run a school, and mine is to teach. If the day comes when migrant teachers in Texas and California can directly exchange useful information, we’ll have something. Until then, you and your bureaucrats have job security.”

“I assure you, we are dedicated to improving NMAS. After all, uh, Mister *Friend*,” she smirked again, “we don’t want *enemies* in the classrooms.”

The jibe at the expense of Jake’s surname brought appreciative chuckles from much of the audience, deflating some of the tension.

“Very funny,” he said, then paused; the group hushed. “You know, Ms. Swanson, laughter is a great thing unless you use it to hide your real problems.” Jake sat down, his arm shaking a little after the adrenaline rush from confronting so many people. As if nothing had happened, a woman stood to ask about NMAS health codes. When Barajas fielded the question, Jake saw Imperial Valley and three others head for the doors.

For the second time in half a day, Tina had been off Jake’s mind. He turned and couldn’t figure out her blank expression. *Maybe the conflict upset her some; that’s understandable. What if she disapproves of me hassling them? That’d be too damned bad. You’re about to find out something about this girl.*

Jake nudged her arm, showing Tina the retraced doodle he made: SO, IDA, ADIOS. “As usual, this is a waste of time,” he said not very quietly and got to his feet again. “I’m going.” *What about you?*

Not hesitating, Tina stood up and stuffed her notebook and conference folder into the large purse. She turned to him resolutely and they left, Jake grinning at the seriousness of his new friend. As soon as they were in the hall, she raised her eyebrows and quietly said, “Yes, it was a waste, but you were wrong about one thing—that last part wasn’t boring at all.”

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