



Ojalá, translated as "God willing", is set in the early seventeenth century in Spain and Mexico. The young hero is raped by her master and runs away to the New World. She forms a surprising partnership that blossoms into love.

Ojalá

By W. Schildt

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Chapter 1

The old hoe was worn and scarred, its handle, dry and brittle but still straight as truth itself. My father carried it as an appendage of his body and together they continued their life's work on Don Antonio's vineyard. They painstakingly cultivated the vines and savagely ripped away the creeping evils that dared to threaten the tender plants. He and his hoe, uplifted against his shoulder, marched along like defiant soldiers, ignoring the age-old scent of fear and mistrust that gripped *Andalucía*.

Two weeks ago, a heretic was made to stand the *auto-de-fé*. His screams split the day, as the flames engulfed his body. His sizzling, popping flesh attested to the tyranny of King Felipe II and Bishop Gonzalo de Illescas, the bloodthirsty Inquisitor. The *auto-de-fé* was still the main entertainment of the pre-Lenten fair. The man, now a charred corpse, had once visited our house. He and my father had talked in whispers. While the crowd cheered the death of another infidel, I saw tears in my father's eyes.

My father and I shared the muddy path surrounded by the morning mist. New apple-green grass hinted of the coming spring, as we passed the skeletal arms of the bare grapevines that banked either side of the road. After mumbling an ancient prayer over his hoe, my father said to me, "I wish that the Angel of Death would visit *Andalucía*. Some of my problems would be solved." He smiled into my anxious eyes as yellow warblers took flight. It seemed only the birds could escape the holy hatred.

"The heroes of the ancient scriptures kept the True Faith and Jehová rewarded them, and yet I have been as observant as possible, considering the times, but the reward still eludes. Remember the payers and songs? I had hoped that you would understand their subtle meaning. I realize now that I kept the family secret from you too long, but what else could I do? With new rumors every day, it seems as if the flames will never be

quenched. Just a slip of the tongue and our whole family would be suspect. The art of deception is tiring.”

As he talked, I clung to the small, silver cross that hung about my neck. Sor Teresa, my only friend, had given it to me while I convalesced at the nunnery when I had the measles’ plague. Papá had threatened to throw the cross into the fire, but news of another infidel cleansing changed his mind.

“I love working in the vineyards. There I am a free man, because I see its beauty. Don Antonio may own the land, but Jehová talks to me there. Do you understand all that I am telling you?”

Then his grip on the hoe turned his knuckles white, while he complained of Antonio’s ominous treachery and his latest demand that I come to work at the Castillo Inn. My parents thought that I was too young and too innocent to be thrust into the lives of nameless travelers, but I was old enough to be betrothed and my wages would solve the problem of a dowry. Last night my father had threatened to cut my coal black hair. He reasoned that with cropped hair I would look more like a boy. When I promised to keep it knotted under a cap if he would spare me the shears, he relented. In truth, freedom from my parent’s watchful eyes was my secret dream. I had never been allowed to leave our house unaccompanied.

“Obey Eloina and Violeta and keep your distance from the guests. With your head bowed, speak only when you are spoken to...” His thoughts trailed off for a moment, and a scowl deepened his weary-worn face.

“I remember the first time that Antonio spoke to me. He threatened me with the flames. How he guessed I will never know.” My father shrugged and shook his head. “What was my sin, that God revealed our secret to the man that I hate most in this world? I know it is dangerous to believe as we do, but there is no other way! My father and his father’s father before him had the True Faith...”

I was intensely curious about Antonio and his beautiful wife, Cristina, who was rumored to have a gypsy lover. Most of Morelia

made a living working for Antonio, but the middle-aged man, of unknown parentage, commanded little respect. He had married Beatriz, the only child of the famous Morelia family, and within days after her untimely death, he had taken Cristina for a second wife.

At a distance Morelia's church tower touched the gray clouds while its bells clanged monotonously. My father's scowl deepened, as he began to pray aloud that I would spend all my time hidden away in the kitchen from those who did not share his faith. He continued to blaspheme and although it scared me, I craved his love and approval.

The tiny town of Morelia sat in the shadow of the brooding three-story inn. Before the Moors had invaded *Andalucía*, the inn had been a monastery, built at the crossroads between Sevilla and Cádiz, the port city where Columbus set sail. Now weary travelers spent the night in the ancient building. In the drafty dining hall guests kept Morelia enthralled with stories of savage Indians and the unimaginable riches found on the shores of the New World. After dinner, the guests caroused in the former monks' cells. A lovely rose garden started by Antonio's first wife surround the cloister that separated the inn from the offices and the don's apartments.

We left the road, entered through an open gate and continued past the main building and the barn where Violeta, a maid of ample proportions, was milking the cow. My father waved.

"Come," he instructed at the kitchen door. After wiping our feet, the two of us and the hoe went in. Eloina, who was sitting at the table, stood as the door opened but then looked annoyed when she saw that it was only my father and me.

"Oh, it's you, José. Where is Violeta? She moves like a turtle." Eloina, an angularly thin woman with liver-spotted skin and gray hair escaping from her bun, wore a perpetual frown.

"*Buenos días*, Eloina. You know my daughter. My father bowed slightly.

Eloina fixed her gaze on me. "She is too frail and too pretty. The men will think that she is more than a scullery maid."

My father cringed.

"But you know how many travelers we have now, so I am willing to try her." Speaking to me, she instructed, "Hang your cape on the hook and then finish grating this cheese. Watch that you do not cut your fingers and get blood on the food."

"Sí, Señora," I whispered.

My father patted his hoe and turned toward the door, "Did Don Antonio return home last night?"

Wiping her hands on her stained apron, Eloina went to the door as my father left. "No, he is still whoring in Cádiz. We have another day of peace."

The kitchen, a cave-like room with age-old blackened walls, smelled of baking bread, rotting vegetables and wood smoke. Hanging iron pots and baskets fought with cobwebs from the beamed ceiling. Water steamed in a large black kettle suspended above a crackling fire. Dough rose in a chipped bowl on the warming ledge. On the floor next to a sack of flour, mice hid in a basket with dirt-caked potatoes, Pizarro's gift from the New World.

Eloina returned to the table with the bowl of dough. "As soon as you finish grating the cheese, peel the potatoes." She pointed to the basket on the floor and then punched the dough. "But first hide that ribbon. Only Cristina has pretty things." My red ribbon had worked its way from under my cap.

Violeta entered, stamping her boots. Her cheeks, flushed from the effort of carrying the milk bucket, made her appear almost young. "It is cold out this morning." In front of the fireplace, she wiped rain drops from her face with the sleeve of her brown blouse. Her brown skirt was mud stained. As she hung her cape, Violetta glanced my way, her eyes flat and expressionless.

"Move," grumbled Eloina. With a wooden paddle she slid an unbaked loaf of bread into the brick oven at the side of the fireplace. "The guests will be ready for breakfast soon. I wonder if the gypsy amused Cristina last night. They are getting so bold,

that one morning I expect the two to dance into the dining hall for breakfast. If Antonio knew about Julio, he would kill them both.”

Violeta shrugged. “He does not beat Cristina. He is always laughing.”

“He would slit the throat of a man, as quickly as that of a chicken. His kind are full of lice and filth and believe in spells. The gypsies are as unchristian as the baptized Jews. All of them should burn.”

Violeta’s body crowded next to mine on the bench. She whispered, “My Juan is a priest.” A strange smile stretched her lips, as she reached for the basket of potatoes.

Once the eggs were scrambled, Eloina pushed a tray into my hands. “Take Ignacio his breakfast. Then stoke the fire in the dining hall.”

I placed the pewter plate before an amazingly thin man with grayish skin and greasy hair slicked to the back of his head. Although I had wished him a good morning, he barked, “Wait for my plate.” While he shoveled food into his mouth, I retreated to a corner of the empty room. The first ray of light fell on a formal portrait of Don Antonio and Doña Cristina. The don emerged from the shadows dressed in a stiff lace collar. His stylized pointed face made him look thin. His hands caressed a pile of golden coins.

Bathed in light, Doña Cristina’s luminous pink cheeks and virginal smile alluded to an incorruptible joy. She held an open illuminated prayer book and an emerald rosary.

When I glanced to see if Ignacio had finished his breakfast, I realized that he had been studying me. I turned quickly to tend the fire. Above the mantle hung the Morelia coat-of-arms, earned long ago by the ancestors of Beatriz.

After finishing his breakfast, Ignacio wiped his mouth on his coat. When I offered to refill his cup with watered wine, he pushed his chair back and left the room without a word. Later as I washed dishes, Cristina threw open the kitchen door and began to scream about the eggshell in her eggs. Her tirade stopped abruptly and seemed forgotten when she noticed me. The doña

was even more beautiful than painted in the portrait. Clothed in purple velvet, with her long chestnut hair braided with ribbons, she was as lovely and regal as the Virgin Mother. With an amused expression, she encircled me before she asked, "Why is she not dressed in brown?"

"She just arrived," answered Eloina, while scaling slops from a pot.

Cristina's pale cheeks colored with distaste, and she left the kitchen.

Eloina made an obscene gesture and threw the pot to the floor. "You clean it, girl." Afterwards she gave me a wrinkled brown blouse and skirt and an apron, along with instructions to keep the kitchen clean, which considering the thick, greasy film on the walls, the mice dirt around the potato basket, and the cockroaches scurrying over the unbaked dough meant little. I soon learned that every day we prepared the same meals. There was no need to change the menu, the guests never stayed long.

The guests' talk was of travel with the more excited guests waving their official travel document, the Raised Seal Pass. One guest, a writer, composed a poem, regarding the fleas in his bed. When I gave him an extra cup of wine, he signed the scrap of paper, Miguel de Cervantes.

On Ash Wednesday the entire household staff attended Mass, kneeling on the cold granite floor in the back of the dark church. Hushed shadows in deep purple and blue clung to the walls and vaulted ceilings. Statues of sad, defeated saints seemed unaware of God's majesty, while a crucifix of a pale, bleeding Christ at the height of his suffering did little to reassure any one of the Resurrection. The only light flickered from the candles in front of the opened diptych, illuminating the story of 'The Damned Cast into Hell' and the 'Descent from the Cross.' The new priest, a pudgy young man, stared vacantly into the gloomy silence.

The Don and Doña were the last to enter the hushed church. As they strolled toward the apse, their high-heeled shoes echoed against the tiles. The priest stopped praying to watch the doña's

swaying skirt. Wearing a white gown and silver mantilla, she would have looked angelic, but for the effect of the corset that she wore under her dress. It pushed her breasts up so high part of her nipples were exposed.

Once they knelt, the Mass began, although the priest forgot the Gloria and Collective Prayer. The two took Communion and then left the church without a glance to the household help.

§

I would have remained hidden in the kitchen had my clothes not been so shabby. Just before I blew out the candle each night, I had gotten into the routine of embroidering roses in brown threads over the holes in my skirt. Violeta had asked me to repair her clothes, also. One day as Violeta was about to serve Cristina, the Doña upset her plate, as she grabbed Violeta's skirt. "Who did this?" she demanded.

"The *muchacha* ... fixed the... holes."

Doña Cristina left the dining hall with a shadow of a smile, and Violeta remained motionless while trying to catch her breath.

The following day Cristina summoned me to her private rooms. The second floor of the inn was a world of unexpected grandeur. The walls were decorated with silk tapestries and thick oriental carpets covered the polished wooden floors. An upholstered sofa and chair spaced cabinets and tables littered with beauty paraphernalia: cosmetic flasks, pots of rouge, combs, a feathered fan and a vase of drooping lilacs. Cristina, in a black silk robe, sent her maid to the corner of the room and waved me to join her. She stared at my embroidered clothing.

A cold trickle descended my spine at the heavy scent of the wilted flowers. The practiced conversation that I had mouthed on the steps was forgotten. Tongue-tied, beads of perspiration wet my brow.

The Doña's green eyes sparkled like emeralds. From a glass jar, she smoothed gardenia-scented cream on her white neck.

Pausing in a gypsy tune, she ordered, "You, kitchen girl, smooth this on my back."

The rug muffled my footsteps in the stillness of the room. With trembling hands, I took the jar and then almost gasped, as Cristina lowered her robe to her waist. I looked away. Sor Teresa had said immodesty was punishable by the flames.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Rub my back!"

While Cristina tapped her golden-ringed fingers on the arm of her chaise, I smoothed the gardenia-scented cream across her shoulders. She carefully caressed the discolored bruises on her neck and arm. "Stop looking at the floor, you little fool. Get a towel and blot me dry."

Once her beauty regimen was complete, the Doña stood, arranged her black robe and then sat before an ormolu-framed mirror and began to pull a sliver-handled brush through her shining hair. "I have a plain silk gown in the sewing room. Make a border of flowers around its hem. Have it finished before the fairs during Holy Week. If you need more silk, tell Ignacio." She raised her chin toward the door, and I was dismissed.

The scent of gardenias followed me, as I stumbled from the room and down to the patio. At the bubbling fountain, the cool water dissolved the suffocating scent. After a few minutes, my heart stopped pounding and the sensation of filth fell away.

On the opposite side of the hall and across from the office, I pushed against the heavy wooden door of the sewing room. Immediately the cool, stale air in the silent room comforted me. The closet-like chamber held bolts of colored silks on a large table. Discarded remnants of velvet littered the floor. Next to dress sketches tacked hodgepodge to the beamed walls, a dress form stood clothed in a blood-red gown. Carefully I opened the creaking lid of an inlaid wooden box to find needles and silk threads in a rainbow of tangled colors. I lifted a needle from the box and a black thread.

The season changed, as did the order of my day. Once the morning kitchen duties were completed, I retreated to my peaceful haven. With the door slightly ajar, I watched guests come and go and even the rotund, balding Don Antonio himself. Secure in my sanctuary, I giggled at the accountant, who made gestures behind Antonio's back while the don yelled. After rustling through papers and refilling Antonio's wine glass, Ignacio bowed and humbled himself like the perfect subordinate. If Antonio had taken the time to search Ignacio's shrewd face, he would have seen a murderous hatred.

Ignacio always wore the same black worsted doublet and yellowed shirt with a stained lace collar. His tight breeches, that buttoned at the knee, and his skinny legs matched his boney, ink-stained fingers and long, yellowed fingernails. "To request more silks," Ignacio instructed with squinting eyes, "you print the color here. Can you write, you brown mouse?"

I nodded. "Sor Teresa taught me at the convent."

He shot me a withering glare, that suggested by our sharing a conversation, he had endangered his hard-won position of authority. I left Ignacio scratching at his ledgers.

One afternoon the Doña entered the sewing room and grabbed the red dress from my hands. She studied the embroidery and then ordered me to find the box of ribbon. As I jumped to my feet, Don Antonio entered the room. His eyes stopped on the black silk dangling from my hand. He seemed to smile with interest at the fear that rose in my eyes. When the silk slipped to the floor, Antonio retrieved it and held it out. As I moved to accept it, he moved his hand to his chest. Then he took my hand and asked my name. I was too dumfounded to reply.

Cristina curtsied and kept her head bowed. There was fear on her face.

As the don continued to hold my hand, he said to Cristina, "When the investors come this afternoon, you will stay in your room."

That night in the kitchen, I dared to mention the exchange that I had witnessed in the sewing room. My simple observation

unleashed a torrent of mean-spirited gossip. "She had no shoes when Don Antonio first set eyes on her," spat Eloina.

"She cannot read," continued Violeta with a smile that showed her few black teeth. "Soon she may have an accident."

Eloina laughed.

I remembered the fear in Cristina's eyes.

§

The rains had ceased, and the Andalusian spring began to bake the land, by mid-afternoon it was unbearably hot. When the Doña wore the vermilion gown on Good Friday, all eyes in the church watched, as she and the rustling dress took their place in the front pew. Again, the new priest forgot the order of the Mass.

The days became months. Cristina ordered more embroidery work, as did Antonio, who had become a daily visitor to the sewing room. Peering over my shoulder, he said, "Your flowers look real. It is refreshing to find an industrious maid." He smiled, as he patted my capped head. "Did you serve the geologist from Madrid? On his voyage to the Viceroyalty of *El Perú*, he will care for my world-famous sherry that I export. The New World would sink into chaos without me." Don Antonio's thick fingers with their heavy golden rings rested on my shoulder.

Wiping the salty sweat from my face, I remembered my father's words and smiled hesitantly.

"I perfected a combination of grapes that produce a sherry whose color, aroma and flavor cannot be compared. I control the destiny of all Spanish spirits. I consider myself a genius."

Antonio's pompous chitchat continued until he asked innocently, "Have you tasted my world-famous sherry?" Not waiting for a reply, he scratched his crotch and laughed. "Soon we shall share a cup." Then he whispered into my ear, "Ignacio will pay you for your work here."

The next afternoon, as I was preparing to leave the inn for my first holiday, Antonio paced the sewing room. The stench of

his damp, clinging shirt filled the room. He scratched his dirty beard and yelled, "Stealing!"

I looked up from my embroidery, startled.

A few angry blotches colored the don's pasty face but then a profound sadness filled his eyes. "My sincere, innocent child are you different from the rest?" He reached out, removed my cap and petted my hair that cascaded down my back. His breathing grew heavy, but at the same time, Ignacio called to me from the office. With a sigh, Antonio left the room.

While the rays of sunlight lingered, I left the inn, feeling exhilarated with independence. My newly earned *reales* jingled in my pocket. *Papá will be proud of me!*

Chapter 2

“José, why are you so late?” asked my mother, crossing the dirt floor to the creaking door of our one-room house. My father closed the door. I stirred on my mat next to my brother and younger sisters, drifting in and out of sleep. It was almost dawn.

“It has happened again. The man is Satan himself,” whispered my father, standing his hoe near the doorjamb. His heavy footfalls crossed the room.

“What has happened again?” My mother pulled the bench from the table in front of the blackened hearth. I turned on my mat so I could watch and listen.

“I have been in the cantina in Cádiz,” muttered my father, rubbing the stubble on his cheeks. “When I arrived last night, he was there. Maybe he had too much to drink...he talked of a beautiful flower, a joy to observe and a pleasure to touch.”

“He was drunk,” said my mother.

“Maybe,” my father answered with a sigh, “but the swine demands my help again...not an accident.” My mother let out a cry, as she covered her mouth. “Ana, he knows about the lovers. This time he wants a murder! He wants the woman to die and the man to hang. Look! He gave me the gypsy’s dagger.” My father opened a sack that he had carried into our house and pulled out a knife. “He said, if anything goes wrong, he will expose all of us.”

My mother moaned and I turned on my mat. I began to shiver. I coughed, hoping they would stop talking.

“And the Lord will guide you continually...and you shall be like a watered garden.” Her prayer stopped and she said aloud as an afterthought, “He still believes Doña Beatriz’s fall was not an accident. We must not panic.”

“We must not panic! Do you expect the Doña to plunge the dagger into her pure Christian heart? Should we expect another miraculous mishap?”

“I expect that the Lord will answer our prayers. Besides we have all been baptized. We go to Mass twice a year, according to the law.”

The silence of a tomb seemed to enfold around them when my father replied, “All the Inquisitor would have to do is question me.”

Unable to stay still for a moment longer, I stood and stretched and wished them good morning.

“Oh, I forgot you were coming home. Go back to sleep. It is early.” My father slid the dagger into the sack. A letter with the inn’s wax seal fell to the floor. He grabbed the folded paper, but he did not ask me to read it. His eyes told me not to question.

“Let me cook breakfast.” I wanted them to see that I had grown up during my stay at the inn, and maybe their conversation would stop.

My mother hesitated, “J...José, look what your girl has brought home.” From the mantle she slid my coins into her cupped hand.

“God of Abraham! Where did you get that?”

“Ignacio gave it to me. Don Antonio said that I was worth more than a maid. He visits me while I sew.”

Before grabbing the money from my mother’s hand, my father ordered, “Go, get fresh water for your mother.”

I lifted the heavy pot from the fireplace and carried it to the door but before I escaped the prison-like cabin, I heard my father bellow, “This is as much money as I make!”

After wasting as much time as I dared, I hummed a song before I kicked the door open and dragged the heavy pot into the house. My mother stood, but she seemed to forget what to do next. Papá, after stacking the coins on the table, drummed his fingers against the wood.

My parents ignored the few remarks I made, so I thought that I would awaken my brother and sisters to stop the evil that

gripped the house. When I mentioned that I would go with them to the market and stop at the convent, Papá's face clouded. "You stay away from Sor Teresa. She fills your head with magic talk. You are one of us, and I have decided that you will marry, as soon as I can arrange it. By the end of the week, you will be betrothed." He pounded his fist on the table to control their palsied shaking. The coins jumped.

"No, Papá."

"You will do as I say."

"No! I made a promise to our Lord *Jesucristo*."

"You dare to tell me that you believe in a baby, who causes constant suffering and grief. They change wine to blood and drink it!"

"Papá, I want to enter the convent."

My father's face turned a deep shade of scarlet and his jaw tightened. He whispered, "You will do as I say, or you will no longer be one of my children. Tonight, I will choose the man you are to marry."

Tears welled up my eyes. "I want to be a bride of Christ."

My words seemed to pierce my father's breast like daggers. His eyes grew wide, as he grabbed the table and threw it across the room, sending the coins flying. "To defy your father is to defy God!" His hand lashed out across my mouth. The force of the blow threw me to the floor and across the handle of the hoe, cracking it in two. Mamá screamed.

Papá grabbed my arm and swung me through the open door. "Go! Leave! Tonight, I will arrange your life. I know what is best!" He continued to shout, as I stood in front of the cabin, sobbing.

"José!" cried my mother, pulling at his shirt. "She is only a child. Do not let her go back there!"

"By the end of the week, she will be married. I will do what is right for my family!"

§

I ran the entire way back to the inn, pausing at the well to catch my breath and to wash my face. The kitchen door was open. I entered the room noiselessly. Eloina and Violeta were busy washing dishes. To my surprise their empty-headed chatter was of me. They complained that behind my disguise of innocent virtue, I was an experienced whore.

When Eloina turned and saw me she exclaimed, “*¡Muchacha!* Why are you here?”

The words “experienced whore” rang in my head, but I managed to mumble, “I missed the inn.” I wanted to tell them that they were wrong, but somehow, I knew that I would always be an intruder in their kitchen world.

With a faraway look in her eyes, Violetta said, “Since you are here, *muchacha*, you scrub the floor while I go to Mass.” She began to hum the “Gloria,” as she handed me the scrub brush.

I got the bucket and water without comment, but their words filled my mind along with the words of my father. Even though I had lived in Morelia all my life, I was out-of-step, an oddity. Soon I was down on my hands and knees attacking the floor, seeing before me in the dirty tiles a drab future.

“Violeta’s newfound faith is annoying,” complained Eloina, scraping half-eaten food from the plates. “What a pity that you were not in the sewing room yesterday. I could hear only part of the shouting between Ignacio and Antonio. The don accused Ignacio of embezzling from the inn! He gave Ignacio until tomorrow to return the money. Ignacio called Don Antonio impotent and made fun of the Doña and her gypsy. Today was the first time that Ignacio did not take breakfast here, although I saw him at dawn leaving the inn. I wonder where he has hidden the money.”

Eloina continued adding more gossip about Cristina. “Antonio beat her yesterday before he left the inn for Cádiz. I saw the Doña this morning before she pulled a veil over her face. I think her nose is broken.” Eloina’s eyes glimmered, as she finished the plates. Then she began to repeat the story.

§

That evening in the candle lit hall, the humid air was still, as thunder rumbled in a distance. Once the meal was finished and guests retired to their rooms, I returned to the kitchen where Eloina scraped rice from a black pot.

“What are you doing, Violeta?” Eloina asked, looking up from her work. Her face shone with sweat. “Since when do the problems of the inn upset you?”

Violeta seemed startled and confused by the sound of Eloina’s voice. She had been preoccupied all day and her work was slower than usual.

She began stacking dishes, but when two pewter plates slipped from her grasp and broke a clay bowl, she clutched the clay pieces in her hand.

“Stupid!” screamed Eloina, “You are bleeding on the floor.”

Violeta opened her dripping hand and smiled.

Eloina gasped and crossed herself before she pulled the bleeding woman to her feet. “What is wrong with you? Are you bewitched? Get out of here!”

Violeta mumbled about voices when she left the kitchen.

§

In the sultry, still night only the crickets sang outside, but Violeta insisted a child was crying. From her bed, she whispered in a tortured voice that I should tell him to stop.

“Who?” I asked.

The darkness and the heat of the attic were suffocating. Thunder rumbled. “I cannot sleep, Violeta.” I threw on my clothes and sparked my flint to light a candle. “I am going to the sewing room. *Buenas noches.*”

The room smelled of new fabric. Light from the glowing candles filled the room with shadows, that flared behind me. I picked up my embroidery, but my thoughts were far from the inn. The words of my father echoed in my mind. Going to my knees,

hot tears scorched my cheeks. “*El Padre, El Hijo, y El Espíritu Santo,*” I began my prayer. “I am confused. Should I honor my father and mother? Show me the path to take...”

My prayer continued and I did not hear Don Antonio enter the inn. Heat lightning lit the night. Sweat from my brow fell onto the immaculate snow-white satin beneath my folded hands. Entering the room without a sound, the don squeezed my shoulder, as he drew his face close to mine. Thunder crashed and boomed.

Chapter 3

Thunder split the night. Terror rang from my mouth and echoed in my ears. The door slammed. I was running, running. Fear engulfed me. A blinding white light sizzled the black night. Thunderclaps reverberated in the tall cypress trees. The faster that I ran, the less I could feel the burning. Darkness blurred the scene. I stumbled. I fell. I shook off the sharp, stabbing pain to continue my escape in a panic so intense that I never felt my broken skin.

When heat lightning blazed the night, my eyes searched for a haven down the road. I kept running. But what alluded to sanctuary, was only an abyss. The phantom followed on my shoulder. The smothering black night crashed against my back. Long, damp hair whipped my face. Thunderous roaring crackled the heavens. A large stone dislodged beneath my foot. I kept running.

My heart felt as if it would leap from my chest. I was a spectator in a nightmare, that moved strangely out of time. My legs grew heavy. Another heavenly explosion shook the earth. I swayed and fell, sprawled on the road. Dry-mouthed and panting like a dog, I lay covered in sweat and unable to move. Only then did I realize that I was sobbing.

A new zigzag tore the sky. A pocket of wind shouted, "Get away!" Jolted, I wiped my nose on my sleeve and staggered to my feet. In the fading light I saw Don Antonio's face and the hair on my neck stood up. "Get away!" screamed the wind.

In the blackish hell did I hear his breathing or mine? Terror gripped me again and my heavy footfalls dully thudded against at the roadway. But exhausted, panting and tottering unevenly, I lost my balance. A sharp pain ripped through my leg. I lay sprawled in the road, unable to move for some time. Struggling

to stand, the pain slowed my escape. Night was easing its grip. Now the thunder sounded farther off.

The road had led me in the direction that I had traveled with my family the season before, the opposite direction from my father's house. For a moment, I remembered all the people and the noise of the city. It would be easy to hide, swallowed in a crowd. The night was redeemed by a predawn colorlessness. I left the main road for what was little more than a footpath. In the grayed morning light, a small cabin stood at a distance, along with a gnarled twisting vineyard and a grove of silvery olive trees. An urgent whistle stopped my heart along with my feet, but then another jay called back. The olive trees stood in regimented rows with a thick underbrush of dry gray-brown leaves and sticks carpeting the ground. I sighed and collapsed on the natural mattress. Doña Cristina's vain command that all maids dress in drab earthen colors was appreciated.

Once the calmness of morning's light filled my mind, my flesh began to throb. My eye was too painful to touch, as were my side and ribs. My swollen lips and cheek made my head feel lopsided. That awareness brought back the nightmare, and I began to weep, but I cried not for the pain. I felt for my cross, but it too was gone. Suddenly feeling feverish, my stomach twisted and knotted. I retched. I lay on the ground, choking on sobs.

While the sun fought to push away the clouds, birds chirped and conversed like old friends. Without name and family, I was orphaned. A hollow cry weighted my soul. I was about to stand when in the clearing a child emerged from the cabin. Another child ran, laughing from the house along with a woman. A brown dog barked and nipped at their heels. The mother pulled a bucket from the well and poured water into a black kettle that was resting on the outside fire pit. After starting a fire under the pot, the father walked into the vineyard with the children.

I watched dumbstruck and detached while the family continued with their everyday chores. What was happening in Morelia? When they realized that I was missing, would they go

to my father's house? Would my family ever think of me? Tears filled my eyes.

The mother washed clothes and then draped them on bushes. The children, washing their hands and faces, threw water at each other, squealing with laughter. The mother picked up her basket and waited, as the father closed the cabin door. After the family had disappeared down the path, only the birds chatted overhead. Sor Teresa fed the birds in her protected sanctuary. Now the convent was a place that I would never know. The scattered sands of time could not be replaced. More tears rolled down my cheeks. I thrust my blood-crust hand into my pocket to find a handkerchief, but instead found a hard roll from last night's supper and my small embroidery scissors. The blood had dried on the points of the blades. I wiped my nose on my sleeve and returned the things to my pocket. I was thirsty.

Leaving my hiding spot, I crept toward the house. The brown dog began to bark and growl, but he was only half-grown and curious.

"Come, pup. I won't hurt you."

Once his careful sniffing and anxious steps relaxed, he allowed me to stroke his velvet-soft head.

"Are you hungry?"

He licked my fingers once the roll had disappeared, and together we walked to the well for some cool water. My thirst quenched, I watched when a hot summer breeze caught a gray shirt drying on a bush. The wind lifted it, billowing it towards the clouds and then floated it close to my feet. When the soldiers began to look for me, they would seek a girl. A strange thought that only a heretic would dare ponder occurred naturally. It seemed perfectly conceived. I remove my bloodied skirt and torn blouse and threw them onto the hot, smoldering coals. With my embroidery scissors I cut my long hair, and then slipped off my chemise and threw it into the fire. I pulled on a boy's shift and then slipped into a pair of patched breeches and pulled on the gray shirt. They smelled fresh and almost new. Under the silvery

leaves of the olive trees, the scent of masculine clothing seemed to give a new confidence. I fell asleep.

The sound of children's voices near the cabin awakened me, but several hours of sleep had done little to refresh my spirit and a renewed grief swept over me. The memories hurt more than the bruises. Loneliness echoed in my ears. Blood stained my breeches.

Once the darkness hid the cabin, I trudged toward the road with little regard. The guests at the inn never traveled at night for robbers preyed the roads, but I had nothing of value. I could not run. I lacked the energy and the spirit of escape. While I had slept, the sun had deserted me, and now menacing clouds released a cold drizzle. Steadying myself with a stick and hoping that Cádiz was not much farther, I continued for some time in silence, hearing only the call of a solitary owl.

Suddenly scuffling and grunts sounded just ahead. A man's pleading was interspersed with cries for mercy. Throwing myself into the high grass, I heard a man scream. Stories of murder paraded in front of my eyes. Time passed. The steady rain fell, and I was numb and shivering. No one crossed the road. The owl hooted. I stretched my cramped legs and stumbled along the roadside. Then my stick struck something. In a sudden attempt to run, I tripped and fell. A thick stickiness warmed my hand.

A strange melancholy calm overtook me next to the lifeless body. Had he found peace? I crossed myself more out of habit than in blessing. Wiping my sticky hand on the dirt, I felt something, a hat. I put it on to keep the rain off my face and left the nameless man.

My pace slowed. Time no longer had meaning. Rain dripped from the hat, stinging my lip. I was cold, wet, and hungry. Walking with my head bent, I had not noticed that morning had broken, gray and dark. I smelled the faint scent of the sea. I walked on, wondering where to hide when I came to a wooden bridge. Sliding down the bank, I sat near the dark, murky water. My head itched so I took off the hat to examine it. The band around the

brim held an oilskin packet. Inside an officially stamped paper, damp but legible read:

La Nuestra Señora del Carmen

Fifteenth of June in the year of our Lord

One Thousand Six Hundred and Six

Enrique Robles, Marinero, Caulker

It was a Raised Seal Sailing Pass, the document so many men had coveted at the inn. Just then the gallop of horses bucked and heaved the bridge overhead. I cowered near the ground.

“Look! There is someone under the bridge!” The soldier pointed.

“You, there! Why are you hiding?” shouted the officer.

The soldier slid down the bank and grabbed my arm. “Just a boy,” he called disappointedly. “What is your name?”

“Enrique Robles,” I whispered and shoved the pass into his hand.

“What are you doing under the bridge?” asked the soldier, glancing at the paper.

“...taking a pee”

Dropping my arm, he said with disgust, “You are all wet...crazy weather!” Then he noticed my face. “Nasty fight you were in. If you are going to catch that ship, you had better hurry. Today is the fifteenth.” He returned the sailing pass.

I climbed the bank, as the soldier mounted his horse and jabbed his heels into its flank. He and the officer raced off at a full gallop towards Cádiz. I looked down at my wet clothes and exhaled. They thought that I was a sailor and mentioned the ship. With a limping gait, I pushed my way through the now thronged street that had awakened to morning. Wagons and carts filled with families and baskets moved at a slow pace on the muddy road. Horses puffed and snorted, children screamed while adults yelled, and babies cried in bewilderment. Peddlers pushed their way along the narrow road with bundles on their backs. Cádiz, called the white city because all her buildings are painted white,

was buried in human congestion. It was market day. Breathing deeply, the tang of sea air filled my lungs. The rain had stopped, but the mist was thick. I hobbled, forgetting the pain toward the screech of sea birds.

Near the end of the street, I saw masts and heard the din of the crowd and cries of the merchants. Eluding the soldiers, I dodged between wealthy citizens and beggars, barking dogs and penned animals. Along the pier five ships were anchored, one with the name *La Nuestra Señora del Carmen* painted on its side. Taking the sailing pass from my pocket, I ran to the gangway.

A sailor grabbed the paper and shook his head, after considering me with his black eyes and weathered face. "I need men not boys. What fool gave you the job of caulker?" Looking at my swollen face, he cursed bitterly.

"I am good," I bluffed because I had no idea about the work of a caulker. A ray of sunlight broke through the mist.

"Where is your bag and why are you late? We needed you three days ago to help load the cargo."

"I...I was robbed."

"Report to the doctor," ordered the sailor. "And do as you are told." Grabbing my chin and twisting my head so that I winced, the sailor said, "The capitán's hand of discipline hurts more than you do now."

I climbed on board, looking back only once. A soldier questioned the man on the dock. The sailor shook his head.

Everyone on the deck seemed busy, as my eyes searched the galleon for something familiar. There were barrels of rice and crates filled with complaining animals. The sails were rolled, and the men were hanging on the rigging. Two guards with swords and muskets stood near the hatch. A man, wearing a doublet and breeches, looking much like Don Antonio, stood on a deck high above, talking with another man, who held a map. A lady and a little girl both dressed in brocade came towards me, followed by an elderly maid.

"Get out of my way," scowled the woman through clenched teeth.

Confused and startled I was about to curtsy when the girl almost knocked me into a crate. There was a din of noise, as the red, leathery-faced crew sang and laughed, and others hooted boisterously and cursed.

While I tried to catch my breath, biting my split lip, the sailor screamed, "Get your ass up to the doctor or you will not sail." He pointed towards the staircase.

A patch of blue showed through the gray clouds and raucous gulls wheeling overhead laughed as I, Enrique, climbed the steps.



Ojalá, translated as "God willing", is set in the early seventeenth century in Spain and Mexico. The young hero is raped by her master and runs away to the New World. She forms a surprising partnership that blossoms into love.

Ojalá

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