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# *Trini*

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**Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe**  
BINGHAMTON, NEW YORK

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ISBN: 0-916950-61-1

Printed simultaneously in a softcover edition. ISBN: 0-916950-62-X

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-73394

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Cover design by Christopher J. Bidlack*

*Back cover photo by Achilles Studio, El Paso, Texas*

This volume is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.

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man's world. Yes, she was—she was sure of it. There was the dream of land somewhere and Papa's seeds. So many things. But still she cried, lost in her misery. Sabochi reached out to comfort her. "I'll stay here with you. I can't make you unhappy."

She almost laughed her tears away. "No—neither of us would be happy. Go, go, go."

She could feel the gratefulness on his lips as he pressed them against her hair. "Grow in stillness."

"I love you, Sabochi. I always will."

"I too - love you."

This was their bond now, unbroken, whole; she would let it be. It was the best time, the right time to part. This way, she thought, we shall always be what we are to each other at this moment. Oh, the pain of it! Will I ever see him again? Will I ever hold him again? If I can only believe that there will never be an end to us. If . . .

*Juárez*

One part of Trini was staring at a yellow beetle making its way across the screen of the kitchen door. The other part of her was feeling a turbulence, muddled questions without answers, muddled feelings caught undefined in her breathing, in the nervous play of her hands. Her eyes, expanded, liquid, stared at and past the beetle clinging unperturbed to the screen. It was the beginning of a long twilight, one like a bursting dawn, sudden, consuming, reminding her sadly of the cabin and Sabochi, both far away. There was no stirring of wind in the dying afternoon where the sun still slivered the coming dusk. She wanted to cry, to scream, to find her way back to Sabochi again, to claim him no matter what the circumstance.

Her eyes narrowed as she bit her lip, her hands tidying her hair. She hated the place. Celia, the children, and she had come to Morentín to help Celestina with spring planting. Three women, plowing and planting in the harsh sun. The work in the fields started at dawn and ended at dusk. Still, the land gave little, for Morentín was a poor, barren little community dotted with small plots of vegetable farms, each claiming a small adobe shack and a well. Water was always low and never enough. It was an ungiving land. The heavy, exhausting work would make her fall on her bed, blessing sleep. Linda was, once more, by her side. That was Trini's only comfort. Trini reproached herself: your child should be more than just a consolation. But the emptiness was still there, and Linda felt warm and human in her arms. The child in her arms made the tiredness fly out of her body at the end of a day, when the emptiness began. With Linda, there was peace. Now, there was a yellow beetle clinging and her thoughts were with Sabochi. She was carrying his child. She felt the blood surge in happiness. When the feeling subsided,

when the mind played with solutions and answers again, the thought of Tonio pervaded. He had been sending letters. They had reached Trini in Morenón, and this was the cause of her restlessness, her dissatisfaction.

Tonio had broken into the fullness of feeling for Sabochi and the child that would be born. Again, her mind went over Tonio's pleas. Oh, yes, he was begging. Trini had thrown the first letter to the door with anger, hating him. But the feelings of resentment and hate did not last. He had intruded, bringing with him a motley of feelings. She remembered his demands for passion. Oh, yes, they had been demands. His pleasures were always satisfied. A part of Trini denied, so what? His pleasures were your pleasures. The appetite for love had been the same. I am like Tonio in many ways, she told herself. But she did not want to forgive him. She was afraid to forgive him.

She was alone. So alone! She was somehow encapsuled in a fierce pride. It's all up to me, my life, without Sabochi, without Tonio. Just Linda and me. But I must do something—something more than accept these burning, empty, desert days—something. The letters ramped into her mind again. I want to see my little girl, Tonio had said. I want you as my wife—we'll get married like you wanted. Juárez has opportunities. Somehow, that stuck in her mind. Juárez has opportunities. Her eyes were back on the beetle again. She remembered seeing similar yellow beetles swarming on a fallen hornet's nest that branched against a tree stump by the side of the road. The beetle's stillness in the warmth of a ray of sunlight was not her stillness. She was looking beyond now. Celestina was coming up the road carrying a letter. Another one! She flushed with anger but at the same time felt a curious excitement. How could she decipher all these feelings?

She laughed. Why not admit it? I've been waiting for the letters. I do want that he wants me. Perhaps he's changed. He says he has. I know better! Again the struggle, and then the thought—the world will have to be without Sabochi from now on. Instinctively, she touched her stomach, still smooth and flat. Thoughts began to explode softly, gently, as she remembered Sabochi in the cabin. Their passion had been so different from her passion with Tonio. It had been a giving without asking, a soft fire building to great heights, but with it was that love that had nothing to do with body. She wanted both—the body love and the spirit love. Sabochi understood the earth of her. To Tonio it was all the pleasure of the body. I

won't go to him, I won't go, she promised herself, even as Celestina came in through the screen door and handed her the letter. "Another one."

The old woman's eyes were inquisitive, curious. "What do you want, Trini? He wants you. How many of us end up without a man?"

"There's more to life than a man!" objected Trini vehemently. Was there? Soon there would be two children. The words "husband" and "home" were security, safety. But these words were part of a dream, perhaps a silly dream. She had heard a sad seriousness in the old woman's voice. "Go, don't be a fool, go to him."

That evening Trini sat in the darkness by the kitchen door. All the chores were done, but the tiredness of her body did not still her thoughts. The heaviness of the heat became her impatience, but there was a moon, cool in the darkness. Oh, how it made her yearn. Her thoughts revisited the blue cottage, the wide bed, the mirror on the wall, the long nights of love with Tonio. It was all there, the grin, the sound of his singing voice. Sabochi was gone forever; she must build on something with someone. No, no, Tonio must not be a mere refuge. She hated herself for falling into the old pattern. Her thoughts were back to Tonio, the beginning of desire faint in her nostrils as she again smelled his uniform while she brushed it. Her hands reached out to feel again the two-day growth of beard over his cheeks, his sensuous mouth. Wanting Tonio—was that love?

By lantern light, before going to bed, she opened the letter. A money order fell out. She picked it up and read the letter, folding it carefully afterwards, placing it and the money order back in the envelope. One sentence from the letter was imprinted in her mind: I will meet you at the bus station on Saturday. She knew she was going. She knew she had to tell him about Sabochi's baby. Could she? Perhaps that was enough reason for going to Juárez—to give some kind of ending or beginning to their relationship. And there was Linda—Tonio was her father.

\* \* \*

"¡Putá!"

Tonio hit Trini with the back of his hand. She fell back on the bed where Linda sat crying. The blow stung her cheek, but Trini



did not cry. She said nothing. She had said everything that had to be said about Sabochi and the baby. Tonio's face was woven in anger and hurt. How could he understand? Trini reached for Linda to comfort her, knowing that the child was the one in the greatest need of comfort. But as she held the child, she began to cry convulsively. The little girl stopped crying and hugged her mother in an attempt to console her.

"You love Sabochi!" His accusation was bitter. Trini did not answer, knowing he was right. Tonio waited for her to answer, waited with hurt surging in his eyes. There was no answer. Trini knew what he would do. He would run away. He did exactly that, slamming the door behind him. He's gone, maybe for good, Trini said to herself, half in panic, half in regret. What am I going to do alone in a strange city? She must be calm. She mustn't alarm the child. Linda was breathing jerky little sobs, cradled in her mother's breast. "Chiquita, calma, it's alright."

But Trini didn't believe her own words. She picked Linda up and wiped the child's tears away. She made light of things by setting Linda on her lap, rocking to and fro. The room was dark and somber. Through a shuttered window, sounds seeped in. He'll come back. He has to come back, she assured herself. The two of them were enveloped in a dark waiting. What if he didn't come back? Fear flickered. Linda's little head drooped on her mother's shoulder, her eyes heavy. It was Linda who mattered, Trini reminded herself. The poor child was exhausted after the long bus ride. She was already fast asleep. Trini quietly unfolded the warm little body on the bed and lay down beside her. Her thoughts ran back to the morning when they had arrived in Juárez. It seemed such a long time ago! Not only that morning; Tonio waiting at the station . . .

From the moment she stepped off the bus with Linda, Tonio had placed an arm possessively around her as if nothing hurtful or painful had passed between them, as if time had stood still since that first year in the blue cottage. How like Tonio! But time had passed, and pain, and loss. She searched his face for some sign of it, but saw none. It was the old Tonio, laughing, confident, handsome, full of plans.

He took them to eat at a place where they served flautas, Tonio serving the wine as mariachis sang Juan Charrasquiado—"Not a flower left . . ." Big, impressive Tonio sat across the table making big impressive plans. She remembered how she had believed so long ago, like the child from Batopilas! It was Tonio's way. A man came

over and pressed a bill in Tonio's hand, then whispered something in his ear. Tonio laughed and placed the money in his pocket. He moved his chair close to her side. "Monday we get married by el civil."

He looked at Linda dotingly. "She sure looks like me." Yes, Linda did look like him, Trini agreed silently, her eyes on the man who had given Tonio the money. "Did you hear me? Monday we get married."

She had hungered for those words so long ago! Somehow the words were not enough. What's the matter with me? She must tell him about Sabochi and the cabin. She pushed the thought away and asked him about the man. "Who was that?"

His eyes followed the man who had put the money in his hand. Tonio laughed. "My coyote. Owed me a bet. Has a contract for mojados with some outfit in California. I'm waiting my turn."

Trini held her breath. "You're going to California?"

Tonio laughed away her fear. "Not now, querida." He looked at her with liquid-warm eyes. "We get married. We live as a family, that's what I want most. Oh, I've missed you."

She felt anger rise to her throat. Didn't he miss Licha? Wasn't she the one that mattered in his life? No—she mustn't think that. The letters begging, hungering, were for her, for Linda. Licha was gone forever from his life—who else could there be? Blood rose to her cheeks as she remembered the passion they had shared. It was more than that. There was more to his wanting . . . She wanted to reach out and touch his hand, but she dared not . . . Perhaps what she had had with Sabochi . . . She erased the thought from her mind guiltily, then looked up to see Tonio drinking his wine. He impulsively joined in the singing of Juan Charrasquiado as he reached out to put his arm around a passing waitress, who laughed and hit him on the chest, pushing him away. Trini felt an old uneasiness. The next moment, he was lifting her chin, looking into her eyes, promising, "I've waited a long time, my wife."

My wife! The words stretched in light. My wife! The words bathed her in warmth. Somehow, the world seemed right again. Now, he was filling her glass. She drank the wine eagerly, wanting to feel it in her veins, wanting to believe that the warmth would last, wanting all her fears to dissipate.

"Let's go home." Again soft, secret words from his lips.

"Home." She repeated the word with wonder.

"Nothing fancy."

"Let's go home." Her words vibrated with anticipation.

It had been a mile and a half walk to the presidio in the arroyo where Tonio lived. As they walked along the heat-blasted streets, she told herself, I'm happy, I'm happy, content, hopeful. She would have a husband, someone to love her, claim her. A thought suddenly pressed her. She had to tell him about Sabochi's baby.

The red haze of the sun swallowed the earth walls of the presidios along the street. The street was similar to those in the arrabales of San Domingo, all makeshift, like her life. In corrales, rusty, broken salvage leaned against adobe walls—broken sinks, tires, an old carcass of a car, all useless, abandoned. They were following the natural curve of the arroyo, like the verge of a stream. Women talked outside doorways, and children yelled shrilly as they ran barefoot in the dust. Trini's eye caught the figure of a small, thin boy wetting himself, the wetness forming a circle in the dirt as he laughed. What do I do? she asked herself. Do I have the courage to tell him about the baby?

She was following Tonio across a street toward a block-long presidio with a black tarpaper roof. The smell of onions and peppers saturated the air. A pretty young girl sat on top of a car fender while a boy ran his hands secretly down her arm and rested on her thigh. Two old men walked in front of them, deep in conversation, words spilling from cracked, excited voices. Trini felt very much at home.

"That's it. Number twenty-seven." Tonio was leading the way. The rooms were cool and dark as if the sun had been suddenly stolen. Home was two rooms separated by a dull, faded yellow curtain; behind it was a bed and a chest of drawers. The rest of the apartment was the kitchen, shuttered and closed. Trini opened the back door, which led into a patio where she saw a woman hanging out wash while an anciana threw out dirty water from a basin. Two more women talked by the side of an outhouse. Tonio stood beside her. He kissed the back of her shoulder lightly, then turned her gently around. Yes, it was happiness that swam inside her, brilliant and full. All the old feelings were caught in the late afternoon. He whispered into her hair. "Sorry?" Linda was reaching for her hand, her eyes sleepy and tired. "I'm thirsty, Mamá."

Tonio picked up the child, smoothing the hair pasted to her little face by perspiration. She cuddled up against him, repeating, "I'm thirsty."

He set Linda down on a kitchen chair and made his way to the kitchen door. "Faucet's outside."

They waited for him sitting at the kitchen table, Trini stroking

Linda's hair. Then both parents watched the child fondly as she drank the water.

"Trini . . ." his voice was earnest.

"Yes?"

"We'll be happy."

Trini was silent, but there was the thing she must do. Tell him, about the baby. How would she begin? Anxiety tore at her throat. Linda was leaning her little head on the table, looking at them through drowsy eyes. Trini picked up the child and put her on the bed, taking off her dress, tying up her hair to cool her off. Trini sat by the bed, fanning the tiny face, eyes heavy with sleep. Tonio sat beside them, watching, the afternoon heavy in the room. Linda fell asleep, little beads of perspiration resting on her hairline. Trini's heart commanded—Now, now, now—but all she could do was turn her face away to look at her sleeping child. He sensed the tension. "What's wrong?"

The words had to come out. "I shouldn't have come."

"You did . . ."

"I know." The words choked her. Then the rush, freeing her. "I'm going to have Sabochi's baby."

It was done. She turned to look at Tonio, meeting his eyes, head lifted, then rose quickly to cross the room as if to find reasons at a distance from him. "After you left, I went to him, Tonio. He's always been there when I've needed someone—all my life." She stopped and repeated the words faintly, slowly, "All my life."

Tonio screamed the words across the room. "He wasn't there! You went to him!"

"I went to him." God! It was true. She looked up at Tonio. He seemed to have shrunk, slumping down on the bed, hands covering his face. I'm hurting him so, but he must understand. "I went to him after you left town—I had no one—you made it clear there was no one but Licha for you. We stayed in a cabin until the snow melted . . ." Why go on? It was enough—it was enough.

"You've always loved him, Trini." It was a statement of sadness, more than an accusation. But he was right. His next words were like the twist of a painful knife. "Sabochi is the only man you've ever loved."

"That's not true!" Trini was sobbing now.

"Do you still love him?"

"Yes."

He called her, "whore . . ."

Now, in the darkness, as she lay alone with her child, she still felt the blow he had struck. She felt the knifing accusation. Puta! puta! puta! It rang in the darkness, but it rang untrue. How long had she lain there fully awake, remembering? Every nerve in her body, every sense was waiting for him to come back. How short-lived the happiness she had felt that afternoon. What if he didn't come back? She was in a strange city with only a few pesos in her purse. The thought of returning to Morentín—no! What then, San Domingo? No. Maybe she could find work in Juárez. For how long? She was carrying Sabochi's child. I mustn't be afraid. That's the thing. I can't be afraid. She huddled on the bed, lying next to her sleeping little girl, waiting in the dark.

She drew Linda to her, holding her, stroking the hair of innocence and earth. Through the shutters, the light of the moon fingered thinly into the room. She went to the window and opened the shutters, letting the moonlight spill into the room. Such a beautiful spring night! Shadowy people sat in doorways. They knew nothing of her loneliness. She could hear muffled sounds caught in strains of music and laughter, shouts and whistles. She went back to Linda and held her close. The child stirred in her arms, then opened her eyes, whispering in the dark, "I'm hungry."

Was there any food? Trini went to a cupboard and found a can of peaches, a loaf of bread. She found a can opener in a drawer, then she opened the can and poured the fruit into a small dish, taking it to the child, watching her eat by moonlight. There was a lantern on the table, but she did not feel like looking for matches, and the dark was comforting. Between mouthfuls, the child asked, "Where's Papá?"

Contagious. Trini answered softly, "I don't know."

"Is he coming soon?"

Oh, Tonio, please, please, for her sake. She needs you so, she pleaded in silence. And then, as if in answer to her plea, the door opened and through the master shadows of the evening Tonio entered.

"Papá!"

Linda ran to him, arms outstretched. He picked her up, kissing her hard on the forehead. Then he put her down and sat next to Trini on the bed in the darkness. She felt a rush of love for him; she wanted to speak of it, but words did not come. She sat perfectly quiet, at times drawing her breath in sharply.

She heard his words, soft, thoughtful. "I wish it hadn't happened, but there are many things I wish hadn't happened."

"I love you." Her voice sounded helpless, defenseless. His head came to her breast as she stroked his face gently, the full moon singing their forgiveness. Linda crawled between them, exuding a happiness that warmed them. They sat listening to sounds outside the window for some time, and when the child slept, forgiveness was the passion they had shared together so long ago in a blue cottage.

\* \* \*

"Twenty-four hundred pesos!"

Trini looked at the bank book in her hand. The words Banco Nacional de Méjico were engraved on the cover. The account was in her name. She looked at Tonio, questioning, as he explained, "It's just a little bit, but it's for land, the land you want."

"For land?"

"The piece of land you've always planned for."

"Oh, Tonio!"

"Save it—I'll send more."

They were sitting on a bench at the processing station at the international bridge. Behind Trini, a window framed a huge warehouse full of glistening painted machinery on the El Paso side. Tonio was leaving for Salinas, California, with fifty other braceros to work in the fields, to make American money. Monshi and Elia sat beside them. It had been Monshi and Elia, who lived in number thirty-one in the same presidio, who had always talked about the riches in the United States. Monshi, like Tonio, had been waiting for el coyote to find work for him. Elia urged Trini to cross to El Paso to work as a *mojada* while she waited for Tonio to come back. Now Monshi and Tonio were leaving. Elia had already found a job for Trini in El Paso as soon as they could get her across without papers.

"Hey, there's el coyote!" Monshi whistled and waved to catch the attention of the dark, burly man. He was herding workers into a bus, keeping count in a notebook. Trini watched the long line of braceros wearing sweat-stained hats. The coyote waved back disinterestedly, then returned to his business. Monshi asked Elia, "How many before us?"

"Two . . ." Her voice was the beginning of tears.

"Hey, woman, don't cry."

A little sacrifice for a future, that was the way Elia had explained

it to Trini. Trini clutched Tonio's hand, the grip tightening when she thought of him going. Linda was sitting on Tonio's lap. California was a foreign land, an inaccessible part of the world to Trini. She cautioned, "Please take care."

"I'll come back—just a year, that's all. I hate to leave you with the baby coming."

"I'll be alright."

"Sure."

"Yes." She remembered how Linda had been born without Tonio around. He didn't remember. "A year, that's all . . ."

She loved him so. She would save money—enough to buy land, their land. El coyote was approaching, shouting, "All you green-carders, load number four. Get in line!"

Tonio picked up Linda, hugging her close. He put an arm around Trini. "I'll write."

"Yes, yes, yes," she whispered, kissing him over and over again.

Then they were gone. The women of the departing men waited until the buses filed down the street, circling over the streetcar tracks, making their way across the immigration bridge to the United States side. Then the buses disappeared. Trini's life was hazed once more, a blur in the future. It was time for her to journey again, to search, to find, to plan. An old guilt rose. She had to leave Linda once more to work in El Paso. When you're poor, she thought, all is given up, even your children. I mustn't be bitter. Someday . . .

"Now we find La Chaparra," Elia exclaimed in a practical voice.

"What?"

"To get you across the river." Elia was looking closely at Trini. "You sad about leaving Linda with me?"

"I would like to care for her myself. You're so kind to offer to take her."

"It's the thing to do—leave our children for the daily bread God does not put into our mouths."

"Don't."

"Listen, she'll be alright."

Trini suddenly felt tired, as if she had journeyed for centuries, her destiny still unshaped. An ache arose . . . Oh how she wanted to see Tía Pancha's face, to hear Buti and Lupita's laughter, to feel her father's arms around her. Now, she would leave Linda again. She looked down at her child's face, trusting, curious. The child would make do in her child's world. Trini's hand tightened around Linda's as she followed Elia along Juárez Avenue. Suddenly, she

stopped determinedly and promised herself, "The money is for land, just for land."

\* \* \*

La Chaparra, a small-framed, fiery-eyed woman of indeterminate age, told the group to follow her up the sandhill behind her house in El Arroyo Colorado, a poor barrio close to the river. Trini's shoes dug into the blistered red sand as she followed the others up the hill. She was one of eight people who were going to cross to El Paso, all mojados, without legal papers. There were three girls about her age, two Indians, and a man named El Topo who seemed to be well experienced in border crossings.

The Indians made it to the top of the hill before the others. El Topo warned the group when the Indians were out of earshot, "Cajui. Never go into white man's land unless they're running away. Probably slit somebody's throat."

Trini, apprehensive, noticed that El Topo's speculation was taken calmly by the other climbers. She glanced at the Cajui half-fearfully but couldn't help noticing how harmless and innocent they appeared to be. La Chaparra was at the top now, her brown skin shining against the old orange blouse snugly belted at her waist with a man's belt. She wore an old leather skirt that had seen better days, round dangling earrings, incongruous army boots, and a wide sombrero. Her face, washed clean and honest, turned slightly to watch the last stragglers catch up. La Chaparra sat down on the red sand made redder by the sun; everyone followed her lead.

Sitting on the edge of the mount, Trini caught a view of the river cutting the land thinly, vegetation spreading into the fields of tall yellow grass now amber in the sun. Beyond that were the shapes of buildings and miles of telephone poles. La Chaparra pointed at an old bridge, a converging point of river and railroad tracks. "El Puente Negro."

El Topo, sitting next to her, nodded. "Easy to cross. One guard. Not like old times," La Chaparra added.

"When there were many, it wasn't hard. We used decoys. They would wade across, the guards would chase them. Then the boys would circle back to the Juárez side." He chuckled, "Ha, pobres pendejos, couldn't keep up with us! Thirty, forty people running every which way, and those dumb guards going around in circles."



"Ever get caught?" Trini asked.

"Sure. Many times. They put me in the old cow sheds behind the Coliseum, then threw me back to dear old Juárez."

"Easy now," La Chaparra assured them. "Hundreds cross in a week's time."

"Like locusts coming from the north," El Topo agreed, mopping his face.

Trini looked across at shafts of sunlight forking down on the turn of the shallow river. La Chaparra took out a pack of cigarettes and threw them to El Topo. He passed the pack around. They were friends, those two, Trini observed. Tonio with a green card in his pocket. The land of plenty! "Tonio, my husband," she volunteered, "is working in California. He has a green card."

"You think that makes him special?" asked El Topo with a cynical laugh. "We're all the same. They call us taco, spic, greaser, mojado; we're nothing to them. You know where your husband is? In a choza with dirt floors, no water, no electricity. When I worked in the San Fernando Valley, there was a ditch carrying shit outside my window. Ah, sweet life! I picked melons, straddling rows, pulling vines together, from sunup to sundown. They think we're mules."

"It's money," defended Trini. She had no great desire to cross to El Paso to live among strangers—to clean other peoples' houses—but the money was needed.

"Money! It goes back into the gringo's pocket. The rent you pay for a stinking choza and lousy food takes most of it. The rest you spend for women, liquor."

"Stop whining, Topo," chided La Chaparra. "You cross all the time."

Trini's hopes began to ebb away as La Chaparra, using the long, outstretched nail of her forefinger, mapped out on the sand the way to her waystation.

With steady eyes and steady deliberateness, she explained, "See that road? The one that leads to the tracks? We run it, all the way to the open fields east, after we cross El Puente Negro."

"Shut." El Topo flipped the stub of his cigarette. The river, under the old bridge that spanned it, lay in shallow water most of the time, heavy brush growing on all sides. A new bridge had been built to replace the old one; it was about two miles west, where illegal crossings were more difficult. There was only one guard on the abandoned old bridge, and people were frequently warned by the border patrol that the guards on the high tower still watched the old bridge.

Easy to spot *mojados* from there. But, with weary-worn experience in border crossings, they knew it was a bluff. They knew there was only one man up in the tower, with only one pair of eyes and many distractions. The sun would hit the high tower, which meant the guard would sometimes sleep. La Chaparra explained, "The guard eats, we cross one by one, ten minutes apart, you understand?"

The Cajui nodded their heads in agreement, not because they understood, but because everybody else did so. La Chaparra continued, "We wait till dark. I go last. There's no moon tonight. After we cross, we run like hell, heads down. Remember, low in the brush. We go north."

"Roll in the mud—squat—squat . . ." grumbled El Topo. "The gringo says that's what we do best, squat."

"We get across, eh?" La Chaparra answered with a mirthless laugh, then cautioned, "You girls leave everything behind except the clothes on your back."

They all stood silent now, looking out toward the bridge, until La Chaparra turned and found her way down the hill. Inside the house, the girls put on everything they owned, piling one dress over another while La Chaparra explained about the meetings at San Jacinto Plaza. "You two! You're going to work as barmaids?" She looked at the two pretty girls named Olga and Sarita. "Wait for Julio. He wears a red vest. Don't talk to anyone. Some of the girls sitting around that look like us—they're stoolies. They work for *la migra*. They turn their own kind in for a lousy ten American dollars."

"Muchachitas, watch out!" warned El Topo with a grin. "Julio with the pink hands is a pimp."

"Why barmaids?" La Chaparra teased.

"Listen, old lady, we're not going to do the dirty work for any gringos. We'll make more money our way."

"Not serving drinks!" laughed La Chaparra, then turned to Trini and the other girl. "Right out of the farm—good girls, eh? You have a gringa waiting for you at the park tomorrow?"

"Yes, I have—I have a name here and a phone number." Trini's voice was hesitant, afraid.

El Topo grimaced. "All kinds of alligators in the dirty pond, Julio, gringas . . ."

La Chaparra hit him on the side of the face with the back of her hand. El Topo fell back in a mock fall, chortling and pretending to be in pain. The Cajui huddled together looking confused. El Topo

looked up at La Chaparra, grinning and rubbing his cheek. They're more than friends, thought Trini.

That moonless night, eight bultos trekked along the edge of El Arroyo Colorado, furrowed with gullies. Trini followed the short, stout figure of La Chaparra along a rocky, sinuous path that climbed steadily up to the llano leading to the old bridge. The Cajui seemed very much at home in the dark as they led the way with La Chaparra, never slackening their pace. They were in the open llano now, remote and silent. About half a mile north was the bridge. Behind them, to the south, the lights and sounds along Juárez Avenue blasted the darkness. In a cold half-run, Trini looked up to see tiny stars blinking in the heavens. Eight shadows ran and vanished behind brush to reappear again, to halt and listen, then run again toward the river's bank.

The bridge loomed before them. Trini slid down a wide shallow depression where the ground was soft and wet. El Topo had been right about the mud. They were now at the Juárez bank of the river. They waded across, staying close to the walls of the bridge. El Topo caught up with the Cajui who led the way, the girls following; La Chaparra stayed behind as a lookout. As she made her way across, Trini stopped, peering into the dark to listen. The guard was just overhead. A sluggish fear clung like the muddy waters swirling around her ankles, a cold open void. She shivered in the darkness, gulping, listening to the intake of her own breath. The others were already across, damp shadows waiting. She ran across and huddled among them, body chilled, clothes caked with mud. Foul brown water flowed over her feet and ankles as she and the others silently watched La Chaparra edge her way across, a burlap sack draped over her shoulder. She approached, a finger to her lips, motioning for them to follow her as she made her way through tall cattails and brush spreading on the edge of the muddy water. Suddenly, a flickering cigarette sailing down from the bridge broke the darkness. The guard! La Chaparra fell flat to the ground, gesturing quickly for them to do the same.

Trini went down flat into soft, wet mud smelling of manure; she felt the sharp cut of thicker branches on the side of her neck as she lay breathless, waiting, hair wet against her face. The guard turned away from the bridge and La Chaparra, half-crouching, motioned for them to follow her. They stumbled along through a field, then turned eastward, breaking away from the river. With the bridge behind them, La Chaparra broke into a run, then stopped before

a barrow pit. She jumped in, barrel-like, rolling down. Everyone followed. Chaparra's panting was close to Trini's ear as she slid down, heels digging the soft earth. At the bottom she brushed her hand against the side of her neck to feel the warm, sticky blood from the cut on her neck. A floating misery choked her. She wanted to cry but couldn't. Instead, she stretched out her pregnant body to delude the ache that overwhelmed her. The baby! Was the baby alright? She sat up, head down, and wrapped her arms around her stomach as if to protect it. She felt it stir.

"Safe." La Chaparra's voice rasped with fatigue.

For a while, eight bultos lay scattered along the pit. No one said anything. Then La Chaparra was up again, scrambling out of the pit. Everyone followed, running across a drainage ditch toward a rotten old water control gate away from the river. They came to a canal running east and west in the middle of emptiness. La Chaparra pointed to the outline of a shack past the control gate. They crossed a narrow wooden bridge that spanned the canal, then headed for the shack. When they reached it, La Chaparra opened the creaking front door, which was loose at the hinges.

Trini found herself in a huge, empty, musty room that smelled of skunk. She watched La Chaparra put down her burlap sack and fumble in it for candles and matches. El Topo fell heavily on the floor, whispering hoarsely, "Everything hurts . . ." He let out a long, soft howl of relief, then looked up at La Chaparra as she lighted the candles. "Woman of my life, do you have some liniment on you? Or better, whiskey?"

La Chaparra ignored him, putting the small velorio candles on a broken stool against the wall, the only piece of furniture around.

Everyone was exhausted. Here they would wait until the first morning light mingled with the dark. La Chaparra would wake them up when it was time to meet El Gordo, who would come for them in a car, then on to San Jacinto Plaza where they would disperse, each to his own fate.

La Chaparra lit the candles as each of them found a place to sleep.

Trini lay down on the floor among candle shadows, her hands pillowing her head. Tomorrow she would be in a strange world. . . . Sleep came.

\* \* \*

She worked hard for her patrona in El Paso, speaking in gestures, grimaces, smiles, for la gringa knew no Spanish and Trini knew no English. She always felt uncomfortable under la gringa's scrutiny. Days of toothpaste smells and furniture polish; Trini caught la gringa watching her through the corner of her eye as she mopped floors and ironed clothes. She enjoyed working when she was alone, watching extravagant soapsuds thrashing away in the washing machine. Hot water, cold water, the measure of days. Pale and puzzled, she adapted awkwardly to the automatic order of her new world. She was very much alone, sleeping in a small bare room where her mind would spill over with hunger for the brazen colors of her own world. The smell of cooking beans, the slap of tortillas. She thought of Linda too often. She wanted the closeness of her child. Gringas were lucky to have so much money, what sacrifices did they make? At night, she imagined how la gringa and el gringo made love. Did he go to her bed, or did she go to his? Did they make love at all?

There were oddities--the plate, the cup, the spoon set aside for her use, la gringa's assumption that mojas were dense. She knew that her patrona did not mean to be unkind, but it made her angry. Many times she was slow and clumsy because la gringa's eyes told her that she was.

The gringa's children followed her around, asking for the Spanish names of things as she fed and bathed them. Playing in the yard with the children one day, Trini found a robin building a nest. They watched together. Still, she remained outside the family's life. The gringo watched her too, his indifferent eyes narrowing when he looked at her growing body. The woman frowned, shaking her head.

One day la gringa told her, with hands gesturing a message about her pregnancy, that she could stay no longer. La gringa made some soothing sounds, then paid her for her work. The day she left, the children hugged her and la patrona gave her two grocery bags full of old clothes, then drove her to the Santa Fe bridge. At the bridge, la patrona told her with little pushes and strange sounds that it was easy to cross into Mexico. Simple, she just had to walk across. La gringa was right.

*Perla*

"It's full of old prostitutes," Elia was saying as she stripped the skin off a cooked chicken, warning Trini about the old mansion on the outskirts of El Arroyo Colorado. It was Trini's last night in Elia's apartment, where she had been staying after the job in El Paso. But Elia's family from Torreón was coming to stay. Elia insisted that she not go away, but Trini knew she had to make it on her own. Trini found an apartment in a neighborhood called El Terreno de Brujas, the witches' lair. It lived up to its name, consisting of two blocks of crumbling ancient buildings, half of them empty, desolate, with gaping windows and doorways. The old abandoned houses had been stripped long ago. A mile or so away from the city dump was the old mansion that housed the retired prostitutes. The debris of the world, stripped and quiet, continuing, decaying, forgotten. It was the cheapest thing she could find for Linda and herself. Tonio sent her thirty American dollars which she promptly put into the bank for land. Elia shook her head as she took a knife and cut off the chicken legs, still warning, "Juárez is a sin city, then you go to that place—it's like a ghost town except for them."

"It's like any other place. And besides, it's all I can afford."

"Do you know that Juárez is the ninth biggest sin city in the world?"

"Everybody sins. That's just a word, anyway," laughed Trini.

"Ha!" Elia sniffed righteously.

"They're like you and me, Elia, just human beings."

"Human, eh? You haven't heard about Perla."

"Perla?" Trini was curious.

Elia concentrated for a few minutes on cutting the chicken into small pieces, building up to her next pronouncement. "A witch, that's what she is, a consort of the Devil."

"That sounds impressive." Trini stopped peeling potatoes for the