

Mirage

By Kathy Taylor



It was so hot that their words evaporated as soon as they were uttered. The silence was vast and empty and their thoughts were at once lost in it. The only sound was the soft lament of their tired feet as they walked in single file across the desert sand. There was nothing in sight for miles and the horizon disappeared in the harsh sunlight.

Esperanza shifted the weight of the sleeping child toward the center of her back, hoping her sweat-soaked blouse might offer him at least some moisture in the deadly heat. The *rebozo* that held him firmly against her was already shrouded in dust. She stopped a moment to listen and noted the rhythmic breathing over

her shoulder. It was good that he slept, but his silence worried her.

The heat was too much for anyone, much less a baby. She had already thought many times about turning back, but by now it was too late. She had begged them to let her go along, promising that she could carry her child the whole way and refusing to believe the stories meant to frighten the faint hearted. Nothing could be harder than what she had already lived through, she had said to convince them—and herself—that she could do it. And now they were on their way. She had no idea how far they had come nor how far they had yet to go. The town had vanished behind them and there was only open desert ahead. “*Ya mijito*, we’ll be there soon,” she whispered to her sleeping baby, watching her feet shuffle along as though they belonged to someone else.

Don José kept a steady pace behind her. They called him Don José, though he was just an old farm hand. His lean and deeply furrowed face was barely visible under a straw hat that had molded comfortably to his head over the years. His bent arms swung slightly forward as he walked, pulling the rest of him reluctantly along. The creases in his large, earth colored

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Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León.

hands followed the grain of a lifetime of hard work. It was crazy for him to go along, they had told him. At his age, the trip would be too hard, and it wouldn't be easy to find work up there either. But there was no talking him out of it. He had just smiled and stood firm, and there was something about his wrinkled smile that could not be resisted. Everyone felt it. It was as though the old man knew something important that no one else did. "Voy, María. I'm coming." He would say every now and then, though no one knew to whom.

The others were the usual mix of men, some of them husbands and fathers, all heading north for the same reason. There was work there. Enrique was the last of five brothers to make the trip. He dreamed of coming back with a new pickup truck. His brothers had jobs in a factory somewhere in Indiana and they had urged him to come.

Álvaro had left a wife and two young children behind, promising to send them money soon. His wife had cried quietly while the children held on to her legs, not comprehending what was to come.

Jesús had assured his aging mother that he wouldn't be gone long this time. The year before he had done well picking fruit in Oregon and he was headed there again.

Humberto and Lalo had used all of the money they could scrape together on plane tickets a few months earlier, only to be caught immediately by the *Migra* and sent back. This time they would take their chances on foot, assuring their young wives that they knew what they were doing.

Miguel and Beto were the most experienced. They had crossed several times before, and claimed to know the way through the desert. They didn't tell about the time they had been beaten by vigilantes just across



the border, and left there to die. Everyone looked to them as the experts. The desert route was in some ways the surest, and they were all ready to take their chances. They had nodded gravely as they were warned to carry as much water as they could manage. The key to making it was having enough water. It would be hotter in the desert than they could possibly imagine.

“We should rest a minute and have a drink,” Beto said, glancing at Esperanza. He had wondered several times if he should offer to carry her child, but it seemed so natural the way she carried him, as if they had again become one body. They all rested for awhile, though there was no shade. There were no visible landmarks of any kind, and they knew that without the compass, they could easily wander in circles, to lie down in the end like dying dogs. It seemed almost worse to sit still under the blazing sun, so they got up to move on. Beto picked up two of Esperanza’s water jugs and tied them to his bundle. She looked at him in gratitude, but didn’t try to speak.

“We’ll find a good place to rest by evening,” Miguel said to encourage them.

When they stopped the next time, Esperanza tried to get the baby to drink more water. What little milk she had left in her breasts would not be enough to sustain him. She looked down a moment as she opened her blouse, to reassure herself that they hadn’t shriveled up in the heat. “I must keep drinking,” she told herself, though the hot water from her jug was hardly refreshing. Álvaro looked away, trying not to think of his own family.

“Where is Don José?” someone asked.

“He’s taking a leak behind that cactus over there.”

“Surprised he’s got anything to leak.”

They were beginning to see more cacti and some brush and rocks. As they walked, Jesús thought he saw something on the horizon.

Their eyes were often tricked in the bright sunlight, so no one paid much attention. Even the occasional cactus ahead was hard to bring into focus through the undulating heat waves above the desert floor.

“I think it’s a tree,” he said half an hour later. It didn’t seem any closer, but he had focused all his attention on his discovery. “Maybe we can at least find some shade.”

“One tree in the middle of nowhere?” Lalo’s voice rose in a question, but he didn’t expect an answer. Humberto shook his head and kept walking.

Esperanza didn’t look up. She just followed the feet in front of her, stopping occasionally to check the baby’s soft whistle in and out. “*Ya, mijito, ya...*” she said to her aching back and the bundle that breathed with her.

“Don José, are you still with us?” Miguel called over his shoulder. Don José hadn’t spoken for several miles. Miguel turned around and the old man swung one of his arms slightly higher in response. The water jugs sloshed at his side as he walked.

Jesús walked behind him, thinking of his father who had died a few years before. Something about Don José’s stiff but determined march reminded him of his own father. He could still picture his mother as he had left her a few days earlier, her familiar shape in the doorway outlined against the light from the kitchen window.

The sun was lower now, but the heat was even more intense. Esperanza could feel the desert floor burning her feet through her thick-soled *huaraches*. “It’s like one big *comal*,” she thought, picturing the large clay griddle in her kitchen and wishing suddenly that she had some of the fresh tortillas she could imagine puffing up on it as they cooked. For a moment she felt a longing to be back there, but then she remembered. That was all gone now. There was no going back, even in her thoughts. She was now on her way to America to find her husband, and that was what mattered.

They had begun to leave a trail of empty water jugs behind them. The ones that remained got heavier as the day went on. The evening sun cast long thin caricatures of their bodies on the ground as they walked. Jesús's tree was still tiny in the distance, even after the afternoon's progress. Miguel and Beto noticed some low shrubs and a small hollow that offered at least visual relief from the endless flatness. The two set off to scout, saying it might be a good place to stop for the night. Esperanza was relieved, as the baby had begun to stir in a whimper behind her. Don José dropped behind, staggering as though he had just left the cantina on a Friday night. Jesús went back to take his arm.

The scouts quickened their pace to reach the spot, and then stopped short. Enrique caught up soon and followed their gaze to the ground in front of them. The bones were smooth and white, scattered in the sand. A skull lay few feet away, as if it had been willed a little farther on by a dying wish. The rest of the group gathered round to stare in horror. Near the shrubs two more skeletons, still perfectly assembled stared back at them unblinking. No one spoke. They didn't try to bury them, since the desert had a way of spitting things back up in time. Don José fell heavily to his knees and said a few garbled prayers to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then he sighed and lay down in the sand. "Ya voy, María" he said, "I'm coming."

After a simple supper of beans and day old tortillas, they settled in for the night, eventually finding strange comfort in the company of their unfortunate predecessors. Everyone knew that *La Muerte* danced around their lives daily, and seeing its fleshless face in the sand had an almost therapeutic effect, like the familiar white candy *calaveras* that accompanied the Day of the Dead celebrations.

They lay in the open silence of the desert, lost in their own reflections. The heat had not diminished even with the coming dark-

ness and no one could sleep. The air was still and the last rays of the sun seemed to light the sky and the whole earth on fire. Esperanza placed her baby gently on the *rebozo* next to her. She had managed to get him to eat and drink and he now lay quietly watching the movements of some winged creature against the red glow of the sky. They had survived the first day. The heat was worse than they had imagined and they had already drunk more than half of their water.

The next day would be a greater test.

Beto and Miguel reviewed in their minds the next day's challenges. They would have to deal with the border patrol just at the point when they would all be near madness with thirst and exhaustion, if they were lucky enough to get that far. It was statistically likely that they wouldn't all make it. Miguel had read recently that 700 people had died in the last few years trying to cross the desert. The temperature at ground level could rise to as high as 140 degrees or higher at midday. "We must be crazy," he thought. "God help us."

At first light they were ready to move on. Miguel warned them not to drink too much of the precious water, even though they were already light headed and nauseated with dehydration. Esperanza gave the baby as much as he would drink anyway, knowing that her milk would soon be gone. No one spoke. Their throats were so dry, it was difficult to swallow. They started off slowly, trying to set a steady pace in hopes of reaching the tree before the sun was high overhead. They could see it clearly now, though still far away. It seemed to move with them as they walked, ever beyond their reach.

They trudged through the morning and the indistinguishable miles. It was even hotter than the day before, and their water was getting low. The flat land seemed to tilt unexpectedly with each step. Miguel checked the compass often, to make sure they didn't wander off course. Esperanza felt weak and confused, a cold sweat dampening her forehead.



Don José fell a few times, and they had to give him extra water to coax him on. Beto warned that they must be getting close to the border, and they would have to watch for patrols.

Jesús took the lead, heading straight north towards the tree, and they all began to share his sense that it would somehow rescue them. They pushed on, leaving more empty jugs behind. There was only one left, which they all shared. And then it was gone.

“We’re almost there,” Beto said. “*Bendito sea Dios.*”

It was that hope that kept them going.

“Water!” shouted Jesús in a hoarse voice. “There’s water under the tree. Do you see it?”

They stumbled on towards the large Mesquite tree with water shimmering on the ground underneath it. The tree stood just over the border, though there was no clear line in the sand, dividing desert from desert. It had long stood there, looking out over the endless miles and witnessing many such

northward journeys. The tree had grown to over forty feet high. Its sturdy form was mirrored underground by a massive root system that reached down far beneath borders and the passing of time.

Jesús wanted to be the first to wet his sunburned face in the cool water. He lurched ahead and sank to his knees under the tree, lifting hot sand in his cupped hands. “It’s gone!” he gasped “The water...” Humberto and Enrique carried Don José the last few yards to the shade of the tree. The others collapsed in turn on the dry ground.

There had once been water there, and a few hopeful saplings still grew under the shade of the nurse tree, as such are called in the desert. “Welcome to America...” Miguel sighed as he leaned against the tree, watching nervously for signs of the border patrol. “...*la tierra prometida.*”

The desert began to spin slowly around them as they lay under the tree. Esperanza

held her baby to her breast and floated in and out of visions of her home village under water and the mountain sliding down on top of them. Don José lay still, moving his lips silently. His weathered arms looked like driftwood in the sand. “We’re here, María. Just like you wanted.”

“...I won’t be gone long...”

“...I’ll send money soon...”

“...a new truck...”

“...a good job...”

“...*ya mijito*...”

The old tree listened until the last words blew away with the wind and only the thin cry of a baby hung in the air.

Then all was still.

The soft thumping of a distant helicopter broke the silence.

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BABY FOUND ALIVE

A baby is the only survivor of a group of Mexicans trying to cross the border illegally. Nine people were found dead in the desert, lying under the shade of a Mesquite tree. The child will be returned to Mexico, where authorities will attempt to find relatives. **MM**

