

THE LONG AND STORIED LIFE OF JOSE MONTOYA



A novel by David Dewhirst

CALavera CATH

It's 1916, and Jose Montoya is on the run. He's fully as old as the century, neither a day more nor a day less, having been born as the bells rang in the New Year and the new century and the new baby, Jose, all at the same moment on January 1, 1900.

His mother, Severa Gomez, didn't pay any attention to the bells or the New Year whatsoever. Neither did his father, Alfonso Montoya, other than to observe to himself when he first heard Jose scream that it was just exactly what the world needed at that moment: More noise. Alfonso supervised a crew of laborers for the American railroad line that ran through Agua Prieta, Mexico. He and Severa already had five other children - Diego, Mercedes, Roman, Eufemia, and Alba - before Jose came along. Alfonso knew noise.

Jose Montoya chose January of 1916 to run away from Agua Prieta for the very practical reason that being so soon after both Christmas and his birthday he would be guaranteed to have at least one nice suit. Douglas, Arizona was a literal stone's throw away from Agua Prieta, across an international border that was crossed almost as easily as crossing a street. His father worked for the Americans and knew enough English to confound middle management. Jose knew even more English than that. America was his destination, and that was the entirety of his plan on that chilly night when he started to run.

It was a simple plan, and one that he had been keeping in the back of his mind for the two years since his marriage to Concepcion Martinez. He had only been fourteen at the time, and Concepcion a worldly seventeen. She had seen in him a handsome young man living in one of the few middle-class houses in Agua Prieta; in her, he had seen hips and breasts. The two had barely had time to exchange more than a few awkward glances before Concepcion had lived up to her name, and a marriage was hastily arranged.

The pregnancy did not last, ending in a torrent of blood after only three months. Jose had felt indifferent at being forced into a marriage, and indifferent at the prospect of being a father; things were beyond his control, and indifference was the path of least resistance through the landscape of the future. With the miscarriage, however, he found his indifference impossible to maintain. The sight of so much blood had shocked him; the loss of an innocent life badly shook his conceptions of how the universe was structured. Escape was his fourteen-year-old's plan, and this was when he first began to daydream of making it to the north.

Two years drifted by. The Great War ground on in Europe. So did the political upheavals in Mexico: A revolution, a president, another revolution. To Jose, it seemed like the wars and rumors of wars that were to foretell the end of the world were all around. And on the home front, as it were, Jose found the most distressing of all the situations: Since she had lost the baby, Concepcion would not suffer herself to be touched. This was his greatest defeat, and with every nightly rejection he found himself daydreaming a little more about northward flight. No more revolution, no more Concepcion; only milk and honey would be waiting for him when he first set foot in Arizona.

It was in the final days of October 1915 that the voices began to swirl around the village: "Villa is coming! Villa is coming!" Refugees began to stream into the city, strange, tired and hungry-looking. They were countless. At the same time, government soldiers – federalistas – were also streaming into the city. Alfonso Montoya had seen them coming in on his railroad, thousands of them. Agua Prieta was rapidly being stuffed full of more people than it had ever seen before, and it seemed possible that it might soon physically burst at the seams, sending refugees, residents and soldiers flying everywhere.

Faster and faster the word passed around, people saying it back and forth and back and forth until all of Agua Prieta seemed to Jose to be buzzing like the inside of some weirdly dry and dusty giant beehive. "Villa is coming!" Pancho Villa was indeed coming. The leader of the revolutionary army in the northern states of Chihuahua and Sonora, he had initially supported the president that came to

power following the revolution but had recently come to a change of opinion and once again taken up the cause of revolution. That was as much of the national politics as Jose knew. Much more familiar to him was the fact that he, his family and a great many other people were tired of revolutions, and wanted only a quiet stability in which they could practice their desperate solitude without interruption.

On the day that the buzzing reached its crescendo, Jose got up in the morning and walked down to the edge of town to see for himself if indeed Villa was coming. It was November 1st, All Saints Day of 1915. To Jose and everyone else in Agua Prieta, it was El Dia de Los Muertos – the Day of the Dead. Flowers and colorful decorations covered every available surface in town, designed to welcome home the visiting souls of the deceased for the next two days. Today the souls of children would walk; tomorrow, it would be the turn of the adults to fly around the places that, in life, they couldn't wait to get away from.

Along the edge of the city, Jose found a different scene. Everywhere were men in federal uniforms, troops loyal to the president. Trenches had been dug and shored up with timber, barbed wire fed out in long lines from heavy wooden spools. Most fascinating of all to Jose were the heavy machine guns that were being emplaced. He had seen pictures of them before, but in real life they were bigger than he had imagined, and also sexier. He found the curves intriguing. He thought how very much like women they were: Designed to kill men with their mysterious openings. Touch one, and you get in trouble.

Jose wound in and out along the line of fortifications, finally stopping next to a machine gun emplacement that was standing near a large, shrouded object. He couldn't tell what was under the shroud, which made him stop at this particular emplacement longer than he had at the others. He supposed at first it was just another machine gun, and the canvas shroud an attempt to keep the omnipresent dust out of it. Then he noticed the heavy black cable that came out from under the edge of the canvas and snaked its way northward. Then he simultaneously felt the steel and heard the hammer

cock on the pistol that was being held against the back of his head.

The young lieutenant that had come up behind Jose was sure that he had captured a Villista spy. Villa was indeed coming, probably that very night, and the fact that Jose was particularly curious about gun positions and the enshrouded objects was particularly damning. He was a good lieutenant. Like most lieutenants would have, this one had dreams of commendations and promotions as he marched his prisoner the short distance to the little dirty white building where his captain had set up a small headquarters for the coming battle.

The captain was a large, round man with a very long, elegant mustache. He was writing in a small book when the lieutenant entered with Jose and made his report. With a sigh, the captain set his book down and looked carefully at Jose, from the top of his head all the way down to his shoes. His gaze lingered on the shoes, and he twirled his mustache distractedly. Jose did not blame the man; he was proud of his shoes. They were not the best that money could buy, but they were in good repair and really much better than the sandals that many of the Agua Prieta citizens wore.

The captain looked up from Jose's shoes and over to the lieutenant. In that moment, the lieutenant awoke and realized that his dream of medals and promotions had come to an end, at least for now. The captain looked back at Jose, but his mind was already made up on the matter. After rather halfheartedly and distractedly asking Jose if he was a Villista spy, and Jose denying it, the captain told the lieutenant to let Jose go.

The lieutenant marched Jose out of the building. To Jose's surprise, once outside the lieutenant again pointed his pistol at Jose and marched him back in the direction of the machine gun. They did not stop at the emplacements, however; the lieutenant held the gun, and the gun insisted that Jose keep walking. It was all the same to Jose. They were heading roughly south, which was pretty much the opposite of the way he had always wanted to go, but at least he was walking.

After walking for many minutes, the lieutenant ordered Jose to stop. Jose did so, and then

turned to look back over his shoulder. They had walked far enough that he could not really see the machine guns. The covered objects, of which Jose could now see there were several, were little more than light-colored humps. He then noticed that the lieutenant's mustache was really rather thin and sparse, not at all like the captain's, and then noticed the butt of the lieutenant's pistol arcing down to meet his skull.

Some time later, Jose slowly opened his eyes. He was on his back in a very slight depression in the ground, where he had fallen at the hand of the lieutenant. His head throbbed fiercely. The colors of the sky and the earth did not seem right to him. He found that he could not move any part of his body other than his eyes, which he tick-tocked back and forth like the pendulum of a clock.

It was at this moment that artillery began to fire on the defensive position around Agua Prieta. It took Jose a few moments to figure out that, as whispered, Villa had come. He could hear the thumps as the guns fired, and feel the ground tremor slightly under him. The shells arced over his head, and then from his other side he could hear and feel the explosions as they landed among the trenches. He had never heard artillery before. He had never considered that it would move the earth itself. He swung his eyes back and forth.

The shells continued to fly over his head, one after another, in their relentless search for meaning. Although the explosions themselves weren't drawing any closer, it seemed to Jose that each one was shaking the ground a little more violently than the last. He wasn't panicked. He was only a little afraid. But with every violent shake he felt the connection to his own body grow a little more tenuous, until at last he felt as if his body were nothing more than so much meat in the butcher's shop, with his mind draped over the top like one of the canvas shrouds he had seen earlier.

At last, one final violent upheaval of the earth lifted him up and propelled him several feet through the air. He dropped back to the ground, but didn't feel the impact. The first thing he noticed

was that he could move again, and he cautiously sat up to look around. The next thing he noticed was that it had somehow grown dark, and even though he could now see the explosions, he could no longer hear them. The final thing he noticed was his body, still laying in the small depression where it had come to rest after he was struck by the lieutenant. This he found more disconcerting than frightening. He could see himself breathing, so he knew that he was not dead. In any case, he thought that if he must die, El Dia de los Muertos would be an auspicious day to do so.

After a moment more of thought, he supposed that he must be both awake and dreaming at the same time. This seemed like the best solution to him, since as far as he knew one did not normally see one's own unconscious body lying in the midst of an artillery bombardment. He then supposed that if he was dreaming he should be able to do extraordinary things, since reality in dreams hangs upon a different framework than it does in everyday life. Then he realized that watching himself sleep was in fact just such an extraordinary thing, and by this circular path he won his own argument.

Time seemed to be slowed down. The explosions from the artillery bombardment on the Agua Prieta trenches each took many seconds to throw their dirt and fire into the air. Jose looked up. Overhead, he could now see each individual artillery round traveling its path from gun to ground. Of even more interest were the children that seemed to sit astride each shell. Jose could see each one clearly, for all that they were in various stages of semi-transparency. Some were smiling and laughing and waving arms around like they were in a rodeo; others seemed much more intent and serious. One little girl even leaned over to look down at him and blow him a kiss as she passed over his head. He smiled and waved back. He watched each round fall, but couldn't make out what happened to the children. He didn't feel like they were hurt by the explosions. How could they be? He supposed that they were going home to visit, and had found a novel way to sail through the air.

A short while later the artillery bombardment ceased. Jose thought that it must be after midnight, but he really had no way to be sure. Time still seemed thick and syrupy. The night sky was

extra clear, and the stars seemed to slowly pulse rather than rapidly twinkle. He looked at his body, still unconscious on the ground, just to make sure it was still there. It was. He decided he would stare up at the stars a while longer, since their slow pulsing was more like a form of dance than it was anything else.

He was still staring at the stars when the first horse began to brush past him. It was followed by a score of others, strung out in a long line abreast. They were beautiful animals. They were moving in slow time, just like everything else, and Jose could see every powerful bundle of muscle and tendon as they glided over the dirt and rocks of the desert floor. The dust they raised behind them in their path curled slowly upwards, and had a beauty of its own. Jose found that he could see through it, when that was what he chose to do.

The men atop the horses were not nearly so beautiful as their mounts. They were the first line of Villa's cavalry charge against Agua Prieta's defenses. Some had faces twisted and bent by rage, scowling and furious; others looked more terrified than anyone Jose had ever seen before. All had their gazes decidedly fixed in the direction of the trenches that they soon hoped to reach. All had their rifles at the ready. All were prepared to kill or to die, or both. Of all the strange things that Jose had seen that night, and of all the strange things that he was still to see, and of all the strange things that he would see over the course of his lifetime, those men on their blind charge to destruction were easily the most frightening.

It was easy for Jose to keep up with the cavalry charge just by walking. He felt a little concerned about leaving his body lying in the desert, since he was now retracing his steps of that morning and returning to Agua Prieta, but he decided that since there was apparently nothing he could do in his disincorporated state to protect his body anyway, he might as well go along and see what would come next.

Jose watched as the Villistas began to open fire in the direction of the Agua Prieta trenches.

Flames blossomed and extended into the most beautiful yellow flowers at the ends of their rifle muzzles. Jose wondered that these machines, these rifles, which were designed solely for the purpose of killing, could create such beauty. It was an epiphany, this symmetry he found in the clear night air of the desert: Death could be beautiful. Beauty can kill you.

The riders continued their charge toward the trenches, firing their rifles, intent on their destination. Jose continued to walk along with them, wondering when the flowers would bloom from the machine guns he had seen that morning. So far, they had not fired back even a single round. He turned around and looked back for his body. It was still where he had left it, apparently unharmed, but at this distance it was only a small bump on the desert floor.

He turned his attention back towards the trenches, and as he did so the most intense light he had ever seen hit him full in the face. He shied away instinctively for a moment, and then realized that he could adjust his vision to it. The Villista horses and riders had no such ability, however. All around him the horses were beginning to rear up in surprise and terror; the riders had stopped firing and were trying to find enough free hands to simultaneously shield their eyes and cling desperately to their panicked mounts. From all along the trenches, the federalista machine guns now began to blossom with their own flowers of flame, larger and more intense than the Villista blooms had been.

As the horses reared around him, Jose had time to appraise the situation. The mysterious covered objects that he had seen that morning were in fact powerful searchlights. The clever federalista defenders of the city had waited until the Villistas, charging through the darkness, had reached a point where they could not turn back. The defenders then hit them in the face with the full power of the lights. Illuminated and confused, the Villistas were easy targets for the federalista machine gunners. The bullets, each bigger than one of Jose's fingers, were entering flesh, severing arteries, tearing muscles, shattering bone. Horses and men were beginning to fold up in slow motion and drop to the ground, horses on top of men and men on top of horses. Here and there, where a man was killed

instantly, Jose could see both the spirit in its original position and the body as it fell to the ground, like a model's robe being dropped for an artist. A few of the spirits thus unencumbered of their bodies looked around confusedly, seemingly unable to piece together what had just happened. Most, however, did not take long to notice their ruined selves lying on the ground, and with a shrug they simply began to walk off across the desert.

More Villista horses and riders were charging up to join the battle. Having seen the devastation wreaked upon the first line, this second wave was charging a little less enthusiastically than the first. They also were at least trying to shoot out the searchlights, even though they did not seem to be having much success at it. Just behind them, federalista artillery shells had now begun to raise a curtain of dust, flame, smoke and shrapnel. Villistas either retreating from the fight or trying to join it would need to pass through this fire.

Jose was watching this bombardment closely and trying to figure out if it was close to where his body was still lying. His attention seemed to be fixed on one particular area of dense, swirling black smoke. He tried to look away from it. He could not.

She stepped out of the smoke directly where Jose was looking. She was as elegantly dressed as any lady Jose had ever seen. On her head was a large white hat that was almost completely hidden by all of the ostrich and peacock feathers that were stuck into it. Her dress was a red satin sheath that went all the way down to her feet, curving in and out where it was appropriate for a woman's dress to curve; to Jose, it looked like someone had formed a giant bud vase out of satin and stuck her in it. Her elbow-length gloves were likewise red satin. In her right hand she was folding and unfolding a fan over and over again. Her body was nothing more than bones, the head under her hat a grinning skull. This was La Catrina, the fancy lady herself. This was Death.

Jose wasn't frightened. This was El Dia de Los Muertos, after all. La Catrina was not only expected, she was celebrated throughout the country in statues made from skulls and in skulls made

from sugar. And what more natural place to run into her than here, in the middle of a battlefield? Far from being scared, Jose actually felt himself mildly aroused at her presence. Her movements and gestures were both sensual and hypnotic: The graceful way she seemed to float over the desert. The flirtatious folding and unfolding of her fan.

She was moving at a speed that was normal to Jose's perceptions, instead of the slow-time which seemed to affect everything else. She wound in and around the soldiers, looking each one over from head to toe, still folding and unfolding her fan. She even seemed to be stopping and smelling some of them, inhaling deeply like they were roses that just happened to be wearing pointed sombreros. Every so often she would take her fan and rap a soldier smartly on the shoulders a few times, as if she were trying to get their attention.

It did not take her long to circulate to Jose. She looked at him, and at once she snapped open her fan and raised it to her face in what was almost a coy gesture. Jose blushed and stood very still, even though he felt as if he should be bowing or genuflecting. Her open eye sockets slowly roved up and down his body from behind her fan, returning at last to his face. She cocked her head to the side, and the feathers on her hat gently waved up and down. She continued to hide her face behind her fan. The blackness of her eye sockets was tangible. Jose thought that instead of the black of night, or of nothingness, it was really more like two puddles of ink. It was a beautiful blackness.

He wanted desperately to tell her he loved her, but he couldn't move his mouth at all. He wanted fiercely to grab her and take her right there in the dirt and carnage, but found that he could not move a single muscle. He was aware of his paralysis. He was aware of his growing erection. And then he was aware of her fan as she raised it high above her hat and brought it arcing down toward his skull.

In the brief moment before the fan struck him he was able to stare her fully in the face. She was beautiful, La Catrina. It was no wonder they made candy skulls out of sugar. The candy makers had

been right all along. And then, once more, Jose Montoya slept in the desert.

He awakened to find the captain from the day before standing over him, nudging him with his boot and looking disgusted. The captain's disgust was aimed at the lieutenant who had been ordered to release Jose the day before: It was not hard to distinguish a bump on the head dealt by a lieutenant's pistol from the broken, shattered, charred and shot-up bodies of Villistas that were also lying in the desert. The Villista attackers had been repelled with devastating losses; the federalistas were now taking advantage of the peace following their victory to bury the Villista dead before they began to reek of decay and lost dreams. To the captain and his men, that meant throwing the slain into whichever artillery crater happened to be closest.

Jose's head hurt fiercely as he got to his feet and began the walk back towards Agua Prieta. His throat was so dry that when he tried to swallow it stuck halfway, and he had to walk the rest of the way back in that condition. The scene he was passing through was clearly the aftermath of the events he had witnessed last night, and as he neared the line of trenches around the city he once again saw the spotlights which had played such an important part in the victory of the night before. They were no longer mysterious, and Jose no longer had much interest or curiosity about either them or the machine guns. In fact, the only thoughts he could sustain for very long were about La Catrina.

He was very much in love, as he thought love to be in his teenaged mind. He searched his memory for any stories of anyone he had heard of ever having met La Catrina before, but his memory didn't store any such accounts at all. He decided that perhaps the Fancy Lady had feelings for him, too, if he were the only man that she had ever shown herself to. Could that be possible? He had no way to be sure of her love. He did not know when he would see her again. Nonetheless, he had determined that this was a great love that would go on forever.

As he passed by the vendors and candy shops and all the merchants in the marketplace on the

way home, he found that he was still in possession of his wallet and bought every candied skull and papier mache skeleton he could afford. The vendors were happy to be moving merchandise the day after El Dia de Los Muertos, and parted with their various goods at reduced prices; so much so that by the time Jose reached his house he had acquired more than an armload of purchases in remembrance of his beloved La Catrina, and had to spend his last bit of money hiring a boy to help him carry everything home.

At his house, he found Severa Gomez and Concepcion sitting in the front room. Because he had been absent since well before the battle, the two women had fed each other's fears to the point that both began believing he had somehow been killed in the fighting. Jose's arrival at the house did not initially convince them otherwise. With his filthy, bedraggled appearance and the minor but bloody wound on his head, both Severa and Concepcion initially believed that he was an apparition come to visit them from some mass grave on the battlefield; it was only when he physically let them touch him that the two women believed that he was alive and among them. Collecting up all of the treasures he had purchased on his way home, Jose went upstairs to wash and go to sleep.

It's March 1916, and Jose Montoya is still running. It has been almost two months since he crossed the border into America and started calling himself Joe. It was the middle of January, in the middle of a moonless night, when he slid out of bed, got dressed in his best new suit of clothes, bundled up his skulls and skeletons and a shaving razor, and crept out of the door and over the border.

Within a day of leaving Agua Prieta he had arrived at El Paso, Texas, bought papers that made both the name Joe and his American citizenship dubiously official, and talked his way into a job with the railroad, trading, although he didn't know it, on the good name of Alfonso Montoya, his father. Alfonso had known for some time that Jose had plans to leave Agua Prieta far behind, and had spread word up and down the rail lines on both sides of the border that he would consider it a favor to be

returned if his son, Jose, were treated kindly.

Alfonso had also been instrumental in seeing to it that Jose had a completely new set of clothes to wear when he left, going so far as to go to the tailor himself and act as a stand-in for Jose so that the new suit could be relatively well-fitted and ready in time for Jose's birthday. Although for the rest of his life Alfonso would never admit it to either Severa Gomez or Concepcion, and for a short while after Jose's departure he would get up and leave the room rather than listen to discussion about the boy, he was secretly proud of Jose for having the courage to pack up and set out on his own. Alfonso did not consider that Jose was running away from anything. In fact, he saw it quite the opposite: This was a headlong dash towards the future, and beyond this point nothing would ever be the same for Jose.

And in fact, nothing was the same. Jose, more from choice than necessity, began to use English almost all day long. After three days in El Paso and speaking English non-stop, he had his first dream in English. In the dream, he saw La Catrina turn a street corner ahead of him. He called out to her to wait. He ran to catch her, but she was always turning one corner ahead of him, over and over. At last he turned one final corner, and found himself standing outside the gates of an army camp. He was no longer in El Paso, and he couldn't see La Catrina anywhere. A loud voice coming from everywhere at once told him that she would be back soon, and that he should always be vigilant for her return. Jose awoke the next morning feeling even more in love than he had the day before.

In his new capacity as an American and as a railroad employee, Jose rode the trains from El Paso along the southern border of New Mexico and over the Continental Divide down into Arizona, and then back again. He was a brakeman, riding in the caboose and waiting for the engineer's signal that it was time to scramble onto the roofs of the freight cars and help slow the train down with the brakes. The trains going westward to Arizona carried freight and passengers destined, each in their own happy or unhappy way, for all the little towns that lined the railway; the returning eastbound trains for El Paso were full of copper, heavy and slow to stop.

It was cold and dangerous work, and he loved it. The caboose had a small coal-burning stove to provide warmth against the chill of the high-desert winters. He could sit near the stove and listen to the stories told by the conductors he rode with, but when the sun was shining and the temperature was not too cold he often chose to sit atop the train, alone with his thoughts and watching time and the land rise and fall and stretch away from him. Sometimes he would outstretch his arms and pretend he was an eagle soaring over the hills and valleys; sometimes he would just lie on his back and look into the sky, wondering how high it went before it wasn't blue any longer, and trying to pick the shape of La Catrina out of any random clouds that came into his field of view.

On Jose's second trip from El Paso to Douglas, the other brakeman from his crew, Ned Skelly, was killed as he and Jose were coupling together the cars full of copper that made up the train to return to El Paso. Ned was still between two cars when the engineer backed them up together, impaling Ned on the couplers between the two cars. Jose was off to the side of the rails, and had a clear view of Ned. Lingering a few seconds, Ned turned his head and looked at Jose, his face round with surprise before he slumped and was gone.

The incident left a lasting impression on Jose. He had seen many men killed during Villa's assault on Agua Prieta, but it was not a surprise; those men had expected to kill or be killed, and it had shown on their faces. This was different. Ned was a good man. He had not asked for this death, nor had he deserved it. It was random and arbitrary. In all the years to come, when Ned would make regular ghostly visits to Jose and they would chat like old friends, the surprised expression would never leave Ned's face for so much as an instance. Jose had figured out prior to this incident that the world was a rather arbitrary place, full of comings and goings, this and that, life and death. What neither he nor Ned Skelly had known until this accident was just how far the world was willing to go to prove it.

There was an inquest into the death of Ned Skelly, but it was brief and entirely cursory. The

death of a brakeman while switching rail cars was a not entirely surprising turn of events, no matter what Ned and Jose thought at the time. The coroner, it turned out, was not only unsurprised at Ned's death, but also completely indifferent to it. The inquest was closed in less than a day, the necessary reports and paperwork were filed, and Jose and his crew and a train loaded with copper and a cadaver left for El Paso.

These round trips from El Paso to Douglas and back again continued for two months. Once a week Jose would have a day or two off in El Paso, but for every trip only eight hours or so in Douglas before it was time to ride the train back to Texas. Some weeks he would have no days off, depending upon whether he was needed to fill in for someone on another crew. So one day blended into the next, up the mountains and down the mountains. Jose still spent much of the trips riding on top of the train, and even more so once the conductor explained to him what the Continental Divide was, and that they crossed it twice in each round trip. He always felt, as the train crossed the divide and began its descent, that he was accelerating into a future that stretched out before him and seemingly went on forever.

On March 1st, 1916 Jose was on the train making the return trip from Douglas to El Paso. Over the Divide the train went, and then down through Hermanas and Mimbres before stopping to unload a small amount of freight at the depot in Columbus, New Mexico. Jose hopped off the train as it pulled into the depot and unloaded the crates that were destined to end their lives here; as a brakeman he did many sorts of other odd jobs on the train, especially if they were things that the conductor did not wish to do himself. It did not take him long to push the crates out of the freight car onto the platform, nor to find the stationmaster and get the requisite signatures for the goods. Just then he felt his bowels begin to loosen a little bit. Thinking that he had ample time before the train pulled back out, and not wanting to be taunted later for having to hang his ass over the side of a moving freight train, Jose strolled around the side of the depot, cheerfully kicking rocks as he went, and availed himself of the outhouse.

Every decision has consequences. Jose was still sitting in the outhouse when he heard the train

whistle blow and the engine start to chuff. The front brakeman and the engineer assumed Jose was in the caboose; the conductor assumed he was back perched on top of one of the freight cars, where he liked to lay and daydream. Jose cut his proceedings short and crashed out of the outhouse as quickly as he could, trying to hold his pants up and run at the same time. The train was pulling away from the platform, but still slowly, and he was sure he could catch up. That was until the toe of his right foot caught in the hem of his pant leg, and down he went face-first into the sandy bosom of New Mexico. Injury was added to insult when he landed with his elbow tucked underneath him, and it knocked his wind out.

Struggling to breathe, Jose staggered to his feet and watched the train as it rolled away. There was no way he could catch it now. The upset he started to feel quickly turned into amazement, however. Sitting on the back of the caboose, as clear as day, was the ghost of Ned Skelly, smiling through his eternal surprise and waving at Jose as the train accelerated further and further into the distance. Jose waved back and watched Ned and the train disappear into the distance before he turned and walked into the depot. The stationmaster telegraphed the next station along the line towards El Paso that Jose was in Columbus, so that the message could be passed on to the train that he was safe and had not in fact fallen off the roof, as might otherwise be supposed. Since there would be no other train stopping at Columbus that day, the stationmaster wrote Jose a voucher for the hotel in town. Off Jose went.

As he left the station and headed for the hotel, the sounds of distant gunfire came skipping over the breeze to Jose. A single shot would not have drawn his attention. This was many shots, however, and it was being repeated over and over. His thoughts immediately went to the battle for Agua Prieta that he had witnessed in his own surreal, silent way. He wondered if this ghostly gunfire could be the sounds of the battle catching up to him at last, across all this time and space. He decided that it could. After all, he had already seen the ghost of Ned Skelly today; maybe El Dia de Los Muertos came on a

different day in America, and he was unaware of it. Jose's next, immediate thought was that if this was an American Dia de Los Muertos, then maybe his beloved La Catrina would be nearby. His heart raced. He could not take the chance of missing her. Turning south past the Customs House, he headed down the road towards the gunfire.

Ahead Jose could see a group of buildings partially screened by twisted groups of Madrone and mesquite trees. As he approached the buildings, he stopped short. Across the road was a barricade, and next to the barricade was a sign welcoming visitors to the United States Army's Camp Furlong. It was the army camp that Jose had seen in his dream in El Paso, the same dream in which he had chased La Catrina to this very location. His heart began to race even faster. Was she here? A sentry was standing guard at the barricade, and informed Jose with a laugh that the only way in was to enlist. Jose turned and started walking back towards the Customs House. The sound of rifles continued to float to him over the sand and creosotebush, in and out among the mesquite. It was a sound now that made him think perhaps it was the sound of La Catrina's teeth chattering in her skull, and that she was calling out to him directly.

On the morning of March 2nd, 1916 Jose caught the first train from Columbus to El Paso, gathered up his papers and his sugared skulls, and took the next train back to Columbus. By dinner time Jose was officially Private Joe Montoya of the United States Army, accepted for training with the 13th Cavalry Regiment, Camp Furlong, New Mexico.

The first week of his new life as a recruit in the cavalry did not leave him much time for daydreaming, although he did manage to fit some in. At 4:30 in the morning he woke up, shoveled out the horse stalls, fed the horses, and then ran two laps around the perimeter of the camp. After washing up it was time for breakfast, followed by basic military drills where he learned to march and to stand at ease, to stand at parade rest, and to stand at attention. Jose had never known before that there were so many different kinds of standing, each done in their own certain way with their own certain rules. His

natural, everyday stance was an almost-slouch, so standing at attention, in particular, always gave him a slight pain between the shoulder blades.

After lunch was what he thought of as schoolwork, time spent studying manuals and regulations and pictures and more things than he had ever before considered would be necessary to run an army. Sometimes a corporal would make Jose stand at attention while he tried to recite things he had learned that day; then both his back and his brain would hurt. Those were Jose's least favorite times. His most favorite times were when he was marched to the armory and given his rifle. Then he would practice drill, or crawling with it, or working the bolt, or cleaning it. One of the sergeants instructing him in its use would even make Jose hold it up in firing position while the sergeant balanced a nickel on the muzzle. Then Jose would have to squeeze the trigger without the nickel falling off, to teach him to be a steady aim and to not jerk the rifle when he pulled the trigger.

He was always issued the same rifle. It bore the serial number 1021062, and he had it memorized within seconds of receiving the rifle on his first trip to the armory. In his mind, he had another name for the rifle: El Flaco, the Thin One. He thought this was appropriate. Not only did it describe the rifle, but La Flaca was another name for his beloved, La Catrina. Throughout the day, until he had to reluctantly hand it back to the armorer every evening, he cherished every minute with it. He never let it hit the ground, never left it lying around. To Jose, the rifle was a tangible symbol of his love.

March 8th came, and Jose's first week as a soldier was almost complete. Most of his fellow troopers were given a pass and left the camp to do what good soldiers everywhere do: Drink. Other than cleaning out the stables, Jose was also given the day off. He had not been in the troop long enough to be given a pass out to the town, but otherwise the day was his own. He cleaned his boots. Twice he started a letter to his family, and two times the paper ended up as crumpled balls tossed into the trash. He brushed his uniforms off carefully, followed by the good civilian suit that he had received

for his birthday.

Eventually there were no more chores he could do in the barracks, and he decided to go on a walk across the brief stretch of desert to the shooting range, which was the source of the gunshots he had heard the day that he found the camp. Even though he had not yet actually been allowed to fire El Flaco, and even though he could not retrieve it from the armory today, he thought that perhaps just going to the range and mentally practicing might make him a better shot when the time came. He thought that was reasonable, since as a child in school he had gotten very good at mathematics in the same way, making up and solving problems in his head. He arrived at the range and looked around. It was empty, and he headed towards the observation grandstand to lay down and look up at the shapes of the thin clouds, just as he had done for the past two months riding on the roofs of the trains.

In quiet contemplation, he closed his eyes and let the sounds of the desert sing to him. He slept, but only lightly, and visions of sugared skulls and La Catrina pirouetted around in his mind, mixing here and there with El Flaco and shouting corporals and serious sergeants. His sleep was so light that he seemed to himself to be perpetually awake and dreaming at the same moment. Time thus passed more quickly than he realized, and when he awoke with a start just as he was about to finally seize La Catrina in a passionate embrace, the sun was much lower to the horizon than he would have guessed.

He sat up and looked around. On the bench below him was stretched out Ned Skelly, who appeared to be looking up at the clouds and daydreaming much as Jose had set out to do. Jose jumped a little bit when he saw Ned, more from being startled than from any aversion to the dead – he had witnessed an entire battle, after all. Ned raised up his head and nodded a greeting to Jose, and then went back to his surprised contemplation of the sky. Jose nodded his own greeting back, and then decided it was time to walk back to the commissary and get himself something to eat. He turned to see if the spirit would follow him, but Ned appeared content to continue laying on the grandstand. Surprised, but content. Jose left him there and went to see what the cooks had managed to find for

dinner.

What the cooks had found to make was a stew of beans and a few hares that they had managed to shoot early in the afternoon. Jose ate until his belly was full, and then went back to the barracks. He laid down on his bunk and tried again to write a letter to his parents, but found that he still could not get words out in any reasonably coherent fashion. Like they frequently did, his thoughts began to wander. He thought of his parents and his sisters, and even of Concepcion. He wondered what it would be like in 1950. He thought about the war in Europe, and if it were true that the United States would get involved soon, like the sergeants kept telling the troopers. He thought about La Catrina, how perhaps she might come for him some night and take him around the world and show him all of the wonders that she had seen. His mind occupied with these happy thoughts, Jose once again drifted off to sleep.

It was not a good sleep. It seemed to Jose that every few minutes another couple of troopers would stagger back into the barracks from their pass, talking too loudly and banging things around before they fell asleep. It was after midnight when Jose thought that finally all of his fellow troopers must be back, and he allowed himself to fall back into a deep sleep. In his dreams now he marched and drilled with El Flaco on his shoulder. He was the best there was, handling the rifle with grace and strength, his movements from standing at ease to presenting arms fluid and precise. It was like a dance, this drill with the rifle, and his every step was perfect.

More noise roused Jose slightly from his sleep. He was annoyed that people were still coming in and taking him away from his dreams. It was still pitch black out the windows, still the belly of the night. Jose closed his eyes, and heard the noise again. It was a gunshot, followed immediately by several more. A man shouted, and then screamed, and then was silent.

Jose dropped out of his bunk and struggled into his trousers and then his boots as he was lying on the floor. He did not know what was going on outside the barracks. His first thought was that some

drunken soldiers had gotten into a fight that had gone on too long, and now guns were involved. He started crawling towards the door of the barracks, shaking the bunks of still-sleeping soldiers as he went. Most swore at him and rolled over. One never stopped snoring. Only one man, Grayley, lifted his head and seemed like he might be curious enough to wake up and find out what was going on.

Meanwhile, the shooting outside was getting more insistent. Jose arrived at the door, still on his hands and knees, and reached up and slowly turned the doorknob. Once the bolt was clear of the jamb he pulled the door inward and open inch by careful inch, peeking out as he did so. When he had it open wide enough to fit his head through, he stopped. Grayley had crawled up behind him by this point. Jose briefly turned his head back to see who was there, and Grayley gave him a nod of affirmation when their eyes met.

It was all the encouragement that Jose needed. He was not particularly afraid of very many things, and the general concept of death certainly did not scare him. And now, of course, that he was in love with La Catrina, Death herself in all her beauty, he was even less afraid. Never would he be suicidal in order to win her; without entertaining more than a passing thought on that matter, he knew that she would not possibly be able to love him if he tried to force himself on her in that way. In fact, Jose ultimately developed the theory that if La Catrina was much like other women, then the less attention he paid to her the more attention she would pay to him, and the longer he managed to live the more she would desire him.

In fact, he would spend the rest of his life discerning the truth of the latter half of that theory, until at the very end La Catrina would not be able to resist him any longer and he would finally feel her bony embrace on a matrimonial bed in a Veterans Administration hospital in Ohio.

Inching forward, Jose gradually stuck his head out of the doorway until he could see in both directions from the frame. To the right, which was more or less south and more or less the desert until

you got to Palomas, Mexico a few miles distant, was nothing. To the left of the barracks door, after Jose's eyes managed to clear the jamb, was an entirely different scene. This direction was north, and it was the direction of Columbus. Although he could not see the town directly from his vantage point, he could tell that something unexpected and terrible was taking place. The northern night sky was ghastly, flickering in shades of orange. The sound of gunfire was more widespread with the door open, and to Jose it seemed that it was coming from all directions at once, and from both near and far.

Jose stepped cautiously out of the barracks door, one slow footstep followed by another down the three wooden steps to the ground. He could feel Grayley creeping along behind him. They went to the left along the side of the building, towards the sound of the most intense gunfire. There was not much to see between the rows of barracks; the sky to the north was burning but did little to illuminate Jose's immediate area. Jose continued north until he came to the end of the barracks building. Twenty feet away and perpendicular to the barracks was the mess hall, its back turned towards Jose and Grayley. Jose stuck his head around the corner of the barracks and looked in the direction of the door in the mess hall that opened directly to the kitchen.

What he saw froze him momentarily in his tracks. Running towards the kitchen door of the mess hall at full speed was a man wearing a pointed sombrero and carrying a rifle at the ready. To Jose he looked exactly like one of the Villistas that he had watched attack Agua Prieta just a few months before, and any doubt about that was dispelled when the man shouted "Viva Villa" as he kicked in the kitchen door.

Jose started to run at the Villista. He had no weapon and no plan, but that didn't matter. He wanted to stop the Villista. He wanted to die trying. He wanted to kill or to be killed. He thought of everything at once, and nothing at all. In an instant, Jose Montoya had become an animal. He was as fast and as sleek and as powerful as a jaguar.

Jose had covered half the distance to the Villista when an enormous stream of water came flying

out of the kitchen door. It gave off a great wave of steam that misted the cool desert air as it hit the Villista full in the face. The Villista's sombrero and rifle went flying backwards, and the Villista fell to his knees with a scream, covering his eyes as he did so. Jose pulled up short, taken aback and unsure what to do next. Behind him, at the corner of the barracks, Grayley began to laugh.

Next out of the kitchen door was one of the camp cooks. In one hand he held the empty cooking pot, the boiling contents of which he had just emptied into the Villista's face. In his other hand was the shotgun he used to hunt hares and other game to help feed the men of the camp. He looked at Jose and then at Grayley still laughing behind him, and shook his head in silence. With Jose still standing and staring, the cook walked over and swung the cooking pot at the Villista's head. The Villista grunted at the impact and fell over backwards. As he rolled groggily around on the ground, the Villista's hand came within a few inches of finding the rifle that he had recently dropped. The cook raised his shotgun to the Villista's head and fired.

A perfect circle of sand, dust, skull and brain puffed away from the Villista. Blood flowed into sand, and the thirsty desert drank it down. With a nod at Jose, the cook went back into the kitchen and pushed the door close. Jose stood perfectly still, staring at the body of the Villista. Had La Catrina come and tapped this man with her fan, like the others he had seen die in the desert outside Agua Prieta? He had not seen her. Time had not slowed down tonight, like it had then. Had he done something wrong, or offended her? Jose stood in a momentary reverie, until he became aware that Grayley was still giggling behind him and guns were still being fired in and around the town and camp.

The spell cast by the dead Villista broken, Jose turned around. It had been his intention to tell Grayley to be quiet, that there could be more Villistas close by, but as he spun around to face Grayley he had a brief flash of a figure in a red dress as it disappeared around the corner of the barracks neighboring to his own. Jose glanced at Grayley. The man was trying so hard to stop laughing that tears were pouring down his face. They were so intense that water was dripping off of his jaw and

steam rising off of his skin, a caricature of the Villista that had just been killed in front of them. Jose didn't have time for that. He took off running towards the corner where he had gotten the glimpse of the red dress. Grayley and his giggles came running after him.

By the time Jose had raced to the corner of the barracks he had forgotten that a battle was taking place all around him; his only interest was now in catching up to La Catrina, if that were possible. Without stopping to look, he ran around the end of the barracks. Grayley was right behind him. As Jose rounded the corner of the building, he saw a group of three soldiers come around the far end of the long, low structure. He also saw another Villista in between himself and the distant soldiers, at the same moment that the Villista saw him. For the second time in less than ten minutes, Jose went from a sprint to a sandy, sliding halt. Grayley slid to a stop as well, somehow managing not to run Jose down. His giggling, which he had not been able to stop, was threatening to become an all-out belly laugh.

The Villista had been creeping along the side of the barracks, heading in the direction from which Jose and Grayley were coming. Unaware of the group of soldiers at his back, the Villista fluidly raised his rifle at Jose and Grayley and squeezed the trigger. The bullet came so close to Jose's head that he felt its displaced air caress his cheek as it passed, the gentle finger of an invisible lover. The Villista started to work the bolt on his rifle, chambering another round. The lead soldier in the distant group raised a pistol and fired, and the Villista fell to the ground clutching his arms around his stomach. He doubled over tightly into a ball on the ground. He looked to Jose like he was trying to curl up more and more tightly on the ground, as if he thought that if he could only form himself into a perfect ball then the bleeding might stop, and he could roll away back to Mexico.

The soldiers from the far end of the building came running up. The man with the pistol stopped at the Villista to make sure that he would no longer be a threat. The other two ran straight past Jose, who realized with a start that Grayley was no longer giggling. Jose turned around. The two men were looking down at the ground, where Grayley lay with a perfect smile on his face and a perfect hole in

the middle of his forehead. His eyes were open. He looked happy. Jose half expected him to start giggling again as he lay there on the ground. Grayley did not start to giggle again, at least not as he lay there on the ground. Throughout the coming years, though, whenever his ghost decided to drop in on Jose and pay him a visit, he would always be laughing, like he had just understood some great joke.

The soldier with the pistol turned out to be a lieutenant who commanded a machine gun section. He and the two of his troopers that he could find were on their way to the armory to collect a couple of those very same guns to help drive off the Villistas. This was good news to Jose, who would be able to get his rifle, El Flaco, and join the battle in earnest. The four soldiers made it to the armory without incident, creeping carefully through the darkness. The lieutenant unlocked the door, went inside, and started handing out weapons and ammunition to the men waiting anxiously outside. The lieutenant and one of his troopers each had a light machine gun, and the third soldier was carrying as many clips of ammunition and extra bullets as he could haul. The three set off into the darkness, but not before the lieutenant had found El Flaco and handed him over to Jose. Jose also stuffed his pockets with extra ammunition clips and set off away from the armory.

Jose went east until he got to the edge of the camp, and once there worked his way northward. It was not long until he saw a sight that appalled him: Columbus was burning. The sky had given away this fact to Jose long before, but he was shocked at the extent of the flames. It seemed to him like nearly every building he could see was engulfed by fire. In the streets he could see here and there bands of Villistas. The gunfire was all around him now. The soldiers that were sober enough to get out of bed and find rifles had found positions around the edge of the camp from which they could fire at the Villistas; the Villistas were either returning fire towards the Americans or randomly shooting at the relatively few buildings that were not burning. Some appeared to be doing nothing more than riding up and down the street on horseback, shouting unintelligibly.

Jose knelt down into a ditch and pushed a clip into his rifle. The loaded clip was heavier than

he had thought it would be, and it made the rifle balance a little differently than he was used to. It was the first time since joining the army that he had been allowed to handle live ammunition. He raised El Flaco up, took a deep breath, and released it. Through the sights, down the barrel of the rifle, he saw one of the Villistas kneeling down in the street and firing round after round towards the Americans in their positions around the camp. Jose kept the man in the sights as he took another deep breath and let it go. He imagined a nickel balancing on the barrel of his rifle and squeezed the trigger deliberately. The Villista in his sights dropped to the ground and was still.

Jose continued to hold the rifle in position, staring down the length of the barrel at the man on the ground. He waited for time to stop. He waited for La Catrina to come. He waited for the Villista to move. He waited for the clouds to part and the sky to open and the Lord to strike him down. When none of those things seemed imminent, Jose realized he had also been waiting to start breathing again. A single tear came from each eye and was rapidly swallowed by the grime on his face. He gave one little giggle in memory of Grayley, and then worked the bolt on his rifle to chamber another round.

The fighting was easy. The Americans were in dark, concealed positions, looking across clear fields of fire at an enemy that was silhouetted by flame and that did not seem to care overly much if they were shot or not. Jose fired round after round in the direction of the Villistas. If he had a target, he would aim. If he didn't he would choose some random target and fire anyway, both as practice and as a kind of assurance to himself that things were going okay.

One after another the Villistas fell and made libation to the indifferent, thirsty desert. Their situation grew even more dire as the machine guns that had been retrieved from the armory reached suitable firing positions and began spitting and hissing a poisonous stream of bullets at the invading Mexicans. To Jose it seemed endless, the parade of Villistas who kept turning up in the firelight to be shot down like hares. Still he worked the bolt and steadied the nickel, worked the bolt and steadied the nickel.

As the sky began to grow lighter in preparation for the coming day, the Villistas began to withdraw south towards the border. Jose was glad to see them go, and he and the other troopers kept firing at them as best they could for as long as they could. Eventually there was no more that bullets could do, though, and Jose started walking back to his barracks. He thought about taking El Flaco back to the armory, but then decided that perhaps he should keep it handy in case the Villistas returned to burn more things.

Jose passed by the back door of the mess hall on his way back to the barracks. The body of the Villista shot by the cook was still lying in the sand. Over the Villista's shoulders and ruined stump of a head a towel had been placed. The cook himself was sitting in the doorway off of the kitchen, smoking a cigarette, as Jose passed by. Once again the cook had no words, but only nodded at Jose. To Jose, the cook's eyes seemed like blanks, empty and expressionless. Jose thought what a terrible thing it must be to be a cook in the army, to make one's eyes so blank. The cook flicked his cigarette into the sand, got up and reentered the kitchen, and pulled the door closed with a thump.

Jose expected to hear Grayley start giggling in his mind. Instead, he heard the rising and falling hum of voices, and as he turned the corner of his barracks building Jose found the other soldiers in his troop mustering in formation. There was talk of war with Mexico, talk of how many prisoners had been taken, talk of how many soldiers and civilians and Villistas had been killed in the battle. It was a lot of talk, and Jose was not sure how much of it to believe. The corporal that conducted most of Jose's training came over and told Jose that with his return, the only soldier from their platoon that had been killed or injured was Grayley. Jose did not offer his opinion to the corporal about the chances of anyone else having been hurt, given that the entire platoon was more or less passed out for most of the battle. The corporal would not have been interested in Jose's opinion.

With all of its troopers accounted for, Jose's platoon now set out on the final mission of the battle: To collect the Villista dead. Jose knew where two were right around the barracks, of course,

and the Villistas were quickly searched and then loaded into a wagon for their final ride. From the camp the platoon worked its way south, gathering the bodies of the Villistas who had fallen either during the initial stages of the attack or else during their retreat. Jose was glad that his platoon was not detailed to get the bodies from Columbus itself. Several of the Villistas there would have died as a result of his pulling the trigger, and he was not sure if those particular bodies would have had eyes that stared at him accusingly as the bodies were loaded into the wagon.

When the wagon was filled it was taken out into the middle of nowhere, guided during the day by a pillar of smoke. At its destination the Villista bodies were removed from the wagon and tossed onto a pyre. Drums of kerosene had been brought out, and here and there a bucketful was being used to keep the fire burning hotly. Around the fire, some of the soldiers were working with tears in their eyes. Most wore an expression of grim seriousness and determination. Here and there a man would vomit. Here and there a man would laugh.

Jose was surprised by the number of Villista dead that the wagons were bringing in; it was a much higher number than he might have guessed. As each body hit the fire it dislodged embers and ash, and caused a puff of smoke to momentarily eddy upwards independently through the larger column of smoke. It reminded Jose of the way that he had seen the spirits of the fallen at Agua Prieta leaving their bodies, and it reminded him that by now these bodies were just discarded packaging. Nonetheless, just to be on the safe side in case any of their spirits were still lingering close by, Jose handled the bodies as respectfully as he could and gave each one its own personal farewell in Spanish: May the winds blow south. That way your ashes will return to Mexico.

Events in the next week unfolded more quickly than Jose could ever have imagined. The Americans were not going to let Villa's raid on Columbus go unpunished. The Army was going into Mexico after Villa, and soldiers and equipment began to arrive in Camp Furlong almost immediately.

For Jose, who was now allowed to keep El Flaco at his side at all times, every day was an endless stream of trains bringing an endless stream of soldiers and equipment. They formed at the train station and marched into camp, where their tents sprang up and devoured the desert like an ever-widening field of fairy-tale-sized mushrooms. Jose, who had already fought in a battle but who still had only been in the army for a little over a week, was dumbfounded. The imagined armies of his boyhood had been dashing, swift-moving things, but in the week leading up to the raid he had been confronted with the tedious daily realities of army life, sometimes dull and often seemingly endless. Now, as he watched the feet stomp into camp and the tents blooming in the desert, he formulated a new conclusion: Time moved more quickly on a large scale than it did in its minutiae.

The ocean of men that surged at the train station and then flowed into rivers of soldiers was amazing to Jose, but an even bigger amazement was still to come. Four days after the attack by the Villistas, Jose's platoon was sent with dozens of wagons to the train station. Once the sea of men had parted and the wagons were up to the platform, they were quickly loaded with a strange collection of wood, fabric, wheels, motors, and other strange machinery. Case after case was piled onto the wagons, all bearing the same legend: 1st Aero Squadron. This excited Jose immensely, because it seemed to indicate that this unit had something to do with aeroplanes. Up to this point in his life he had only seen pictures of aeroplanes. The pictures delighted and fascinated him, and now here he was with all of this wonderfully mysterious and extremely heavy equipment in crates marked 1st Aero. Although he had only been in the army for a week and a half he was already familiar with the fact that the army sometimes twisted the meanings of words around, evidently without noticing, or even seemed to make up strange new words or combinations for things that already had perfectly good names. Thus, by the time all the crates had been moved from the rail platform into the wagons, Jose was still not certain that the 1st Aero Squadron in fact had anything at all to do with actual aeroplanes.

When the wagons were fully loaded they set out into the desert, stopping at a considerable

distance from the endless rows of tents that the other soldiers had erected. The soldiers who had traveled together on the train with the equipment were following the wagons on foot. Since it was taking them a while to catch up to where the wagons had stopped, Jose's lieutenant had his men unload the equipment from the wagons and lay it neatly out on the desert floor. Then the wagons were circled around it all, and Jose and his fellow troopers settled down into guard duty. It was not a strenuous watch, since the Villistas were long gone, but nonetheless the lieutenant sent out a few patrols on horseback. Since Jose was neither trained nor practiced on fighting from horseback he was not sent on any of the mounted patrols, and had ample time to watch as the soldiers who were on foot arrived and began to unpack their equipment.

Once again Jose was amazed. Some of the soldiers began pitching large tents while others started to uncrate equipment. Their whole mass swirled and flowed, curling in and around each other like delicate strands of smoke. Hoists were pieced together and stabilized, large sections of metal lifted and swung and lowered and lifted again. The sun dropped away and night quickly overcame the desert. The men continued their intricate dance and from the desert floor grew strange shapes that rapidly became recognizable, as chassis, axles, wheels, frames, bodies and engines bloomed into trucks before Jose's very eyes.

Jose could not help but be mildly disappointed that “aero” to the army evidently meant “truck,” but trucks were still at least somewhat interesting in their own right, and as the engine on the first truck came to life with a clash and a clatter the men all cheered. The driver took several gleeful laps around the wagons, sending up great clouds of dust to drift across the desert before he pulled back in and cut the motor. Jose's lieutenant immediately walked over to where the commander of the aero squadron was directing the delicate dance of men and machinery, and the two conferred briefly before the lieutenant walked back over to Jose and three other troopers and ordered them to load up in the back of the truck. They were going to make a mounted patrol like proper cavalry troopers, but it would be on

the back of the truck instead of on the back of a horse. The lieutenant himself sat down in the cab next to the driver.

The truck again clattered out past the wagons, but this time the driver had passengers and a more serious intent. The headlights made a cone of light in front of the truck as it headed out into the desert. The truck itself was little more than a flatbed with a canvas roof, and from the back Jose had his choice of where to turn his attention. He couldn't decide if he wanted to watch where he was going or where he had been. He watched the lights and the wagons and the men at the assembly point get smaller and smaller through the dust spun up by the truck, until at last he couldn't see them any longer. He turned his attention to the cone of light in front of the truck, but found there was a tangible sameness to the small slice of the desert that he could see. He struggled hard to stay awake.

At last, at some order from the lieutenant, the driver halted the truck and killed the engine. The lieutenant got down and ordered the troopers out of the truck. Each man was to go out five hundred yards in a different direction and take up a post. Jose grabbed El Flaco and headed out. The only noise was that of a faint breeze caressing the desert, and the scuffle of the troopers' boots as they walked out in their own chosen directions. By the time Jose felt he had walked five hundred yards, even the noise from the other troopers had vanished. He found a rock that was big enough to lean against as he sat on the ground, and he started to listen.

Here and there he could hear slight rustlings begin as the true citizens of the desert, the small animals who fought out a day-by-day existence here, forgot his still presence and started to move again. He listened to their comings and goings, moments of motion and moments of waiting, until even his breathing seemed in time with the rhythms of the night. He was content to stay that way, certain that no human could come up on him without being out of synch with the night. That was when he heard the laughter.

It came from somewhere in front of him, where no one should have been. It was a low

chuckling sound. Did hares make that sound in the night, when no one was around? He wasn't sure. Maybe the rattle of a snake, answering to a threat? He wasn't sure about that, either, but he didn't think so. It sounded human. Feeling both his duty as a sentry and a natural curiosity, he decided that he had to investigate.

Silently he leaned forward from his sitting position and lowered himself prone like he had been trained, cradling El Flaco across his arms. He started a slow crawl in the direction of the laughter, making his movements a part of the desert night: Move. Wait. Move. Wait. It seemed to Jose that he persisted in this crawl for a long time, but he could not say how long. The laughter continued, guiding him on his crawl through the night. At last he came to the bottom of a small rise, and the laughter seemed to be just beyond it. Slowly up the rise he went, until at last he could raise his eyes over the crest and see what lay beyond.

What in fact lay beyond caused him to pause for a moment, and then sent him scrambling to his feet. The source of the laughter was Grayley, ghostly and shining in the desert night. He appeared to be having a good time, laughing as he sat on the ground with the ghost of Ned Skelly. They were playing cards. Jose scrambling to his feet disturbed the sounds of the night, and Grayley and Skelly both turned to look at Jose as he stood. Grayley started laughing even harder. Skelly eyed Jose with the same frozen look of surprise that he had worn at the moment of his death. Jose, his face a picture of surprise all its own, walked down to join the pair.

Jose was unsure what to make of the scene in which he found himself. As ghostly as Skelly and Grayley were, their current presence here in the desert was undeniable. His mind turned over options. Perhaps he was dreaming, but perhaps he was not. In either case, he thought, if there were ghosts here, perhaps La Catrina would not be far behind. The thought made his pulse quicken and his stomach flutter. Awake or not, he settled down to join the pair. With a giggle, Grayley dealt him in.

The three played through the night, Jose lingering on every sound that might be the chatter of

La Catrina's womanly bones. If she watched, she never showed herself, and as light began to drape itself more and more over the eastern horizon Jose's ghostly companions grew more and more difficult to see. At last Jose excused himself and stood up from the game. With the sun coming up his watch was over, and it was time for him to return to the truck and clatter back to the encampment. He turned around from the pair to grab El Flaco from where he had leaned it against a rock, and stopped cold. Sticking out from the barrel of his rifle was the bloom of a single, perfect red rose.

His heart skipped. She had not shown herself, but she had come, his beloved La Catrina, and left him a token of her feelings for him. His hands shook with the vibrations of his heart as he carefully tucked the flower away inside of his uniform. Wild with elation, he started to run back in the direction of the truck. He stopped to turn and wave goodbye to his companions of the night, but if they were still there in the growing morning light he could no longer see them. Jose made his way back to the truck and loaded up with the other troopers. He was sure that none of them could be as in love as he was.

All along the jarring, noisy ride back to the encampment, Jose could think of nothing else but La Catrina and the rose. Red roses were for love, he thought, but what if they were for friendship? That would be a devastating signal to one as in love as he. Did it mean she was coming to him soon, or did it mean that she was taking leave of him? Every bump in the back of the truck sent Jose's mind off in a new direction, turning over new scenarios and discovering new things to worry about and to hope for.

As in love as he was, however, all thoughts of La Catrina were temporarily chased out of his mind as the truck returned to the encampment. The wagons had been moved outward to encompass a larger circle, within which five more trucks had sprung up from the desert floor. That by itself would not have been enough to distract Jose from his thoughts of La Catrina and the magical rose in his pocket; after his two jarring and deafening rides through the desert trucks were beginning to lose a little of their charm. What captivated him, what made his thoughts stop and his mouth fall open, was the

aeroplane sitting outside of the circle of wagons.

It was beautiful, varnished wood and canvas sparkling in the sunlight, nose angled into the sky as if it were sniffing the air before taking flight. With its four outstretched wings, two on top of two, and its long body trailing out behind, it reminded Jose of a gigantic dragonfly. He hoped he would get to see it fly soon, this wonder of man. His favorite stories when he was a little younger always involved magic carpets, and now he was almost within touching distance of what he supposed might be the closest thing to a magic carpet that he would ever see. He knew asking for a ride in it would be out of the question, but then again, he thought, at this time yesterday he certainly wouldn't have guessed that he was going to find himself bouncing through the desert on the back of a truck. One never knows what one is going to be doing next, was his ultimate conclusion, and in particular that was true when one was subject to the seeming whims of lieutenants, sergeants and corporals.

As if to prove Jose's point, his lieutenant just then had all of the troopers of the platoon form up into ranks outside of the circle of wagons. He first explained what everyone there already knew, which was that the United States Army had permission from the Mexican government to pursue Villa's forces into Mexico, where they were to destroy those forces and if possible capture Villa himself.

It was a topic that Jose had given some thought to in the past few days. When he had left Mexico he had thought that he would return some day, but he had pictured that day with himself in the starring role of prodigal son who had made good in a foreign land. Now it seemed that his return to Mexico would instead be as part of a foreign army of not-quite invaders. He had not allowed these thoughts to disturb him overly much, however. Even though his American citizenship had been purchased from a sweating, obese man in the back of a bodega in an El Paso barrio, nonetheless Jose considered it real in his heart. He had cast his lot with America and as an American. If what Americans did was invade, and he was now an American, then he would invade too. Besides, there was always the chance that once back in Mexico he would be party to yet another battle with the

Villistas, and that chance kept the hope alive in his heart that he would soon get to see his beloved, La Catrina, once again.

The lieutenant was still talking at the front of the formation, and by now he had gotten to information that was of more interest to all the troopers of the platoon. Since the American forces moving into Mexico would be subject to possible attack from the Villistas at any time and from any direction, Jose's company was to be detached from the rest of the cavalry regiment and temporarily placed under the control of the 1st Aero Squadron. It was anticipated that this would primarily be for scouting and for guard duty, but war being what it was, the company was to fulfill any mission that the aero squadron's commander was to give them.

The lieutenant carried on. Jose thought that it was a fine speech that the lieutenant was making now, having worked himself up into a condition full of valor and honor and duty, but Jose was only paying half a mind to it, at the very most. The rest of his mind was occupied with thoughts of aeroplanes, and of what they might look like suspended in the sky if La Catrina came and time slowed itself down for his observation, as it had outside of Agua Prieta. He was certain that he would get to see the great dragonflies in flight now, even if a ride in one was still practically out of the question.

Jose spent the rest of the lieutenant's speech lost in daydreams about flying. He thought that it would be like riding on the top of a freight car, only much higher up, and without direction being dictated by the whims of rails he would be free to fly anywhere he wished, at any time. Since an aeroplane only had two seats, he then thought of himself flying around with La Catrina as his lovely passenger, he in the back seat and she in the front. This he imagined to be a lovely, private, intimate setting. It was not difficult for his imagination to melt the aeroplane into a flying carpet then, which was even more lovely and more intimate, since it was only one big seat with room for two.

The platoon mounted up on its wagons and rode back to the barracks after the lieutenant was finished addressing the men. They were instructed to pack their gear and be ready to ride, since the

order to move into Mexico could come at any moment. A cavalryman packs light, but there is always room for one more thing. In Jose's pack that one more thing was a small tin filled with sugary skulls and the perfect bloom from a single red rose.

The order for the 1st Aero Squadron to move out for Mexico was given only six days after the Villista attack on Columbus. Jose's platoon, riding as sentries, would move out with it. The first to leave the camp were the aeroplanes, now numbering eight. Jose had been waiting all week to see one fly, and now he was almost breathless with anticipation. One by one the sleeping dragonflies came to life with a roar, exhaling a great cloud of smoke. Jose was a little taken aback at first; the noise of their engines definitely had not been a part of his daydreams, which featured flight that was somehow silently majestic. He quickly grew used to the noise and then forgot all about it as the machines began to roll one across the desert floor. They left single file, in some mysterious order, first one and then another picking up speed, trailing long clouds of desert dust behind them, until their tails came off the ground and their noses, sniffing clean desert sky, at last pulled their bodies free of the ground.

The aeroplanes gone, it was time for the earthbound soldiers to load up and begin their own odyssey into Mexico. Jose had been dreading this first phase of the expedition because he knew that it meant another ride in the back of a truck, much longer than any he had been on during the week. He had no idea how long the ride would actually be, because he had no idea where in Mexico the expedition was headed; that information had been kept confidential, to lessen the chance of a Villista ambush. As a final insult, the trucks were loaded with all of the gear that the aeroplane mechanics would need to maintain the machines once in Mexico. Not only would Jose's ride be smelly, bumpy and long, it would be on top of a crate full of spare propellers.

The order to mount up and move out came. Jose climbed into the back of his assigned truck and assumed his perch atop the propellers as the vehicles of the motor column banged to life. The

whole column itself then began to roll, Jose's truck lurching to a start so violently that Jose almost toppled from his crate. The vehicles quickly found their way onto the main road into Mexico. The trucks stayed to the center of the road, neatly splitting the two endless single files of infantry troops that marched on foot along either side. Jose wished that he could be walking instead of riding, but he was a cavalry trooper, and troopers rode. Those were the rules. And he supposed, too, as he watched the infantrymen, loaded down with gear and already sweating in the afternoon sun that he should be grateful for the canvas roof that had been erected over the bed of his truck.

As the caravan steered its course down the middle of the marching infantrymen, Jose felt compelled to wave at or otherwise acknowledge each soldier who happened to glance his way. This did not last long, though, since it seemed to Jose that nearly every soldier he looked at was staring back at him with what could at best be stern disapproval. These glares made Jose feel slightly ashamed that he was riding in a truck instead of marching, and he rode on for another little while staring at his boots. This also did not last long, since after a short while of keeping his head ducked his neck began to get quite sore.

Thus, by the time the caravan was approaching the international border at Palomas, Mexico, Jose had decided that rather than ride along like a prisoner in a tumbril, he would ride like a merchant prince atop his caravan. To Jose this seemed like not only the noblest way to carry himself but also the easiest, since it called for him to do nothing more than ignore the common, walking masses if that was what he chose to do. He found that playing this role was rather easier than he might have guessed it to be; centered as it was around indifference and apathy, all he had to do was simply pretend as if he didn't care about anything overly much.

At the border crossing the Mexican federalista guards had removed any impediments that might have slowed down the American column. On the American side of the border was a small crowd of civilians there to see the soldiers off into a strange land. They had started off the day cheering and

yelling encouragement to the troops, but by the time Jose's truck rolled by most could manage no more than a weak wave. Jose nodded briefly to the well-wishers in general and then briefly at Grayley and Ned Skelly in particular, who were also there and waving far more enthusiastically than any of the more corporeal bystanders. Jose found himself wishing that Skelly and Grayley were coming with him, but he didn't know if the rules for ghosts were the same in Mexico as they were in the United States. Certainly he had seen ghosts in America much more frequently than he had in Mexico, where the spirits tended to politely confine their visits to El Dia de los Muertos.

The Mexican side of the border held a small contingent of federalista soldiers that were far less excited than the American civilians fifty yards away. This fact did not go unnoticed by Jose, who thought to himself that barbed wire delineated people far more than it did land. The Chihuahuan Desert swallowed up barbed wire like candy and rolled right through the border without ever looking back. Only people could be so separated by a few pennies' worth of metal into the cheering and the uncheering, the gleeful and the glum. Those, however, were dangerous thoughts for a merchant prince to have, at least as Jose had written the part in his mind. As his truck drew even with the border and the federalistas, Jose glanced in their direction and gave them a curt nod. The federalistas nodded back. And with that, Jose was back in Mexico.

By July of 1916 Jose had come to the firm conclusion that this war was boring. Although the squadron had moved its headquarters location several times since first arriving in Mexico, it always remained well behind the front lines of the expedition. At least, it was well behind where any front line would have been, had there actually been one; aside from a few minor skirmishes, the expedition forces had engaged in almost no fighting.

Perhaps the most exciting incident had been when one of the squadron's aeroplanes had drawn a crowd after landing outside of Ciudad Chihuahua. The crowd was curious, slightly hostile towards the

Americans, and bored. This turned out to be a bad combination. Women's undergarments started to fly through the air and land in the front seat of the aeroplane, along with shouted offers of what might be traded for a ride. The dashing young pilot might have been able to withstand such tortures for an extended period of time, but the gathered crowd then started taking turns burning holes with their cigarettes in the canvas-covered frame of the aeroplane for amusement. With the aid of a pistol, a loud, clear voice, and threats, the pilot was finally able to bravely face down the crowd and get the plane back to base. At least, that was the version of events as Jose had heard them, and the holes burned in the wings were there for everyone to see, even if the undergarments had gone mysteriously missing.

Not that women's undergarments were in short supply around the headquarters, however. Like every army in the field throughout history, the expedition into Mexico had attracted a following of women eager to be of a certain service to the soldiers, if the price was right. The Army, a much more progressive and forward-thinking organization than it had been in the past, but still fond of rules and regulations, decided that the interests of both the ladies and the soldiers would be best served if these economically and carnally motivated encounters were regulated, too. It negotiated a fixed rate with the women for their services and in return provided them with their own small adobe huts and facilities to make use of, the whole of which was then cordoned off into its own stockade. This stockade had its own sentries assigned to protect the women from soldiers who might otherwise be tempted to try and get free samples, and a station outside the entrance where soldiers who had availed themselves of services were required to stop and take an anti-venereal prophylaxis upon leaving. It was an arrangement that both the Army and the ladies were quite satisfied with.

Jose was torn whenever the thought of going to the stockade crossed his mind. The smell of bodies and perfume made his vision spin to the point where he could only stagger like a drunkard, thinking that he should resist the call of the sirens within the stockade but ultimately unable to do so.

It was not for lack of trying on Jose's part that the scent of the women was too much for him.

He tried going to mass, but the stripped-down field version of the rites offered by the army chaplain lacked the passion and sensuousness of the masses that he had grown up with. In place of the gold and the velvet and the candles and the bloody, tortured statuary of his youth was a canvas tent with a priest in olive wool underneath his cassock who offered neither comfort nor chastisement, the two elements that Jose most needed if he was to overcome the muddy concupiscence of his flesh.

Jose next turned to the boxing matches organized for the soldiers to watch and to take part in. As soon as he knew mass would provide no armor of either a physical or a spiritual nature, Jose signed up for the lightweight division. He had never entered a boxing ring in his life, so he was hopeful that the punishment his body would receive there would make him too tired and too sore to entertain thoughts of the women in their stockade. This plan also backfired, however, when Jose proved to have such a natural talent for fighting that none of the other lightweights could defeat him, or even land an effective punch. Instead of leaving the ring physically battered and bloodied, Jose found himself leaving it even more tense and his mind more full of the women than before the fights started. After just three fights in which each successive opponent was beaten more severely than the last, Jose retired from boxing forever, afraid that his frustrations were going to beat a man to death sooner rather than later.

Religion and violence both having failed him, Jose next took up gambling as his weapon of choice in his internal struggle to avoid the ladies in the stockade. He reasoned to himself that if he could lose all of his pay at dice and cards he would not in any case be able to visit the ladies, since the guards at the entrance always made sure that entering soldiers had the cash to pay the fee that the Army and the ladies had agreed upon. But just as with boxing he had discovered he had talent, with gambling Jose now discovered he also had luck. It seemed to him like almost every hand of cards he was dealt contained three queens, with the assembled ladies faintly smiling like a promise. In dice he rolled every seven or eleven or point that he needed, and he watched with alarm as his money grew and grew

and grew. When Jose heard one of the other soldiers refer to the dice as bones an uneasy feeling crept into him that perhaps La Catrina's unseen hands were manipulating things in his favor, and he walked away from the games.

Forced to ponder the motives that La Catrina might have had in influencing the games in his favor, the only reason that Jose could really think of was that she really, truly did love him, and as her beloved she wanted him to be successful. This only increased his internal conflict, since he knew that now that he had the money he would be handing it over to the women in the stockade. In the end, however, it didn't matter. Jose was powerless to resist the perfume of the women as it wove its way through the barbed wire of their stockade, and he decided that it was better to surrender gracefully to their scent than to continue fighting a desperate battle which he was sure to lose anyway. His head spinning, Jose marched himself over to the stockade and showed the guard on duty his roll of cash.

Once inside the enclosure a momentary panic overcame him, and he came very close to simply running back out again. One of the women standing in the doorway of her hut intercepted him and dragged him inside, however, and Jose soon forgot all of his conflict and left his confusion laying on the floor of the woman's hut. Jose left the stockade with a wave to all the women, who laughed and waved back.

Subsequent visits were easier on Jose. He was learning about life and about women, and in a semi-backwards way about love. He wanted to have as many teachers as possible, figuring that each would have some slightly different lesson for him, and so over the course of time he spread his money across all of the women: Tall ones, short ones, squat ones, slender ones, young ones and old ones, they all had something to offer him. He came to enjoy them all almost as much for their conversation as for the physical comforts that they provided. They came to enjoy Jose because he treated them all politely, and was never cruel or mean to any of them. Eventually they even entrusted him with their real names, the names that they were called by their mothers and friends, the names that they would be called by

genuine lovers when the Americans and their aeroplanes and their stockade left and life returned to normal. The gift of their names was the greatest honor that they could give to Jose, and he was proud to accept it.

The only one of the women who did not entrust Jose with her real name was a pale, slender waif with long auburn hair that the others called La Brujita, the Little Witch. It was not that La Brujita mistrusted Jose with her real name; rather, neither the women nor she herself remembered what her real name was, or where she had in fact come from. Because of the red hair the speculation among the women was that she was of French origin and had fallen upon some terrible misfortune, but no one could say for certain. The name La Brujita was bestowed when it became obvious that she had the ability to cause objects to fly around in the air. This delighted the other women, because La Brujita had only a very small measure of control over the objects once she set them to flight, and it was always entertaining to watch and to see what would happen next.

Jose, like the ladies in the stockade, was also thrilled with La Brujita's power to make things fly around, especially since her power seemed greatest and most splendidly out of control during her lovemaking sessions. Jose loved the miniature whirlwind of trinkets, knickknacks and cast-off clothing that would swirl around the two of them, and he began to wonder if La Brujita might not be able to focus her power and actually propel a magic carpet through the skies. Other soldiers who came to use La Brujita's services, however, were not as excited as Jose was about her magical powers. Most managed to ignore the flying objects, while some thought that she was somehow performing a dual sexual and juggling act. Eventually one soldier complained to the Provost Marshal, who was in charge of overseeing the stockade, that La Brujita was actually throwing these objects at him.

The Provost Marshal himself decided to handle the investigation. After a lengthy private interview with La Brujita in her hut the Provost left the stockade without speaking a word to anyone, although he did stop and take the prophylactic like any good soldier would. The next day a special hut

was provided for La Brujita in which she was to practice her trade, bare of everything except for a folding wooden cot. In this way, sensible Americans would not have to be offended by the sight of a magic that they could not understand.

If La Catrina was jealous of Jose for the time that he spent in the stockade, she did not show it. After every visit to the stockade, Jose slipped back into the adobe-and-canvas shelter that was his and silently slipped his tin box out of his gear. He always opened it with hands that trembled slightly with trepidation, but each time the same sight greeted him: The sugar skulls were still smiling at him. The rose was still in bloom, still fragrant, still as fresh as if it had been cut that very morning. Jose would smile and wonder where La Catrina was and when she would come to him, and then close the tin and slip it back into his pack.

Jose had hoped La Catrina would come to him once he was back in Mexico, but it was not to be. At the beginning of August he found out he was to be transferred back to Camp Furlong in Columbus, New Mexico, the same post at which he had started his army career. The 1st Aero Squadron by this time had only two of their original eight aeroplanes still operational, the rest having been lost due to the harsh conditions that the desert and the altitude imposed on them. The two planes and a small number of soldiers and pilots to operate them would stay with the expedition in Mexico, but most of the squadron was going back to Columbus to test new planes and new materials. Jose was to go with them.

Once again equipment was packed and trucks were loaded, and Jose took his perch on top of a pile of crates as the order to move out was given. The ladies in the stockade lined the barbed wire of their enclosure, waving to the small column of trucks and cavalymen as they pulled out of the camp and started their journey back to America. Jose would miss the ladies, but he thought that America was no place for them; it was too cold there, and they would wilt like flowers taken from the hothouse. He waved back, blew them a kiss, and turned his attention to the road in front of him as the trucks of the

convoy began to clank forward.

The trip back to Columbus would be a few hundred jarring and noisy miles, and would be broken up into two days. Jose was not looking forward to the ride, tossing around inside the mobile dust storm that was the convoy, lurching and swaying over roads that were sometimes rutted more deeply than the axles of the trucks trying to travel over them.

At the end of the first day the convoy pulled to the side of the road so that the drivers could rest for a few hours. The trucks were positioned so that they straddled a ditch that ran parallel to the road, making a position that the soldiers could sit or lie in with the trucks themselves providing overhead shelter. There was not going to be a fire; the light would be visible for miles across the desert, and might attract Villista attention to the lightly protected column. Jose climbed down from his perch and shook the stiffness out of his legs. The white alkali dust of the desert covered the trucks and all of the soldiers, making them look like ghost soldiers wandering the desert. Jose had some water in his canteen, and took a pull on it before splashing a little into his face to rid himself of his dusty, clownish makeup. Dinner was crackers and tinned meat, and Jose could not stop thinking to himself that this was not how a merchant prince should be dining on his caravan.

After dinner Jose climbed back up to the top of the crates on his truck and looked up at the stars. They were compelling, endless, a sea of lights into which he felt he might fall upwards at any moment. New Mexico and America seemed far away to him, another whole day of bouncing along through the desert; the stars seemed both close enough to grasp and yet tantalizingly out of reach. Once again Jose found himself in his most familiar daydream, that of sailing through the air on a magic carpet with La Catrina. The stars turned into an eternal field of wildflowers through which the pair sailed, Jose plucking the choicest and tucking them into the band of his lover's hat amongst all the roses.

Time always dropped away from Jose when he was in the midst of these reveries, and this night was no exception. Lost among the wildflower stars, Jose was the last to hear the drumming hoofs of

the Villista horses as they charged the lonely caravan. The Villistas had followed the American convoy for several hours, and then laid in wait until the early hours of the morning. Now they were charging, intent on raising quick hell with the Americans and then slipping back into the desert. They began firing towards the trucks, and were quickly answered by the American rifles.

Jose was by this point rather unimpressed with the Villistas. This was the third time he had seen them in action, and both of the previous times they had performed more like the turkey half of the shoot than anything else, from what he had witnessed of events. Thus it was with a mixture more of boredom and resignation than anything else that Jose started to climb down from his perch on top of the truck. He went down the side of the truck that faced away from the Villistas, with the intention of crawling into the ditch under the vehicle so that he could join the firefight.

The bullet arrived at the same time Jose did, a stray Villista shot that passed under the truck and then just through the top of Jose's left knee. His first sensation was the impact of the bullet hitting his leg, the hardest blow that he had ever felt in his life. This was followed immediately by the surprising sensation of his point of view turning sideways and dropping towards the ground, his left leg knocked out from under him by the force of the bullet. Jose had the presence of mind to try and crawl into the ditch under the truck, where he would be out of the line of fire. There was another soldier already in the ditch, and he assisted Jose by pulling him in and turning him onto his back.

The pain was unbearable, burning and throbbing, angry and evil, carving its name with a wicked blade across Jose's soul. The soldier that had pulled Jose to safety was applying a compress to try and stop the bleeding, which only made the burning worse. Jose's vision started sliding backwards, the light from the world getting slowly smaller and smaller as he slid further and further back. Eventually, when all that he could see seemed very far away, his body jerked once and it felt to Jose like he had just bounced against some sort of surface and was now ascending back up.

Strangeness awaited him as his consciousness slowly slid back into place, but it was a

strangeness that Jose was immediately familiar with. Just as it had during the battle outside of Agua Prieta, time had wound itself down to a fraction of the speed it normally moved, leaving Jose to watch events unfold around him in slow motion. Even the waves of pain that continued to break over him from his shattered leg were moving in slow motion, and he could feel each one build and swell before it washed over him and slowly retreated away with a few small grains of his consciousness.

Lying on his back, Jose was able to see only a small rectangle of daylight between the bottom of the truck and the lip of the ditch. The stars that he could see through this tiny window pulsed like tiny glowing hearts and swirled like a Van Gogh painting. He tried to sit up and failed. He tried to turn his head and failed. The most that he could do was to turn his eyes back and forth, so that he could swing his vision from the rectangle of sky on the one extreme to the soldier who was stuck in time compressing his wound on the other. The soldier giving aid to Jose was frozen with a combination of fear and intense concentration etched into his face. Jose decided he would rather watch the stars swirl, and turned his eyes back to the lip of the trench and the rectangle of sky above it. The stars continued to dance and swirl, making their own kaleidoscopic patterns in a show that only Jose could see. He watched this dance of the stars, and realized that as long as he kept his attention there the waves of pain were not quite so intense.

With time slowed down to an imperceptible crawl, Jose had no way to judge for how long he lay there before the dark shape passed in front of the stars. At first he thought that perhaps a cloud had drifted across the sky, but then concluded that any clouds that were in sky were probably just as stuck in time as everything else. As Jose watched, the darkness moved back and forth across the small area of sky that he could see. It was definitely not a cloud, then. Without thinking overly much, Jose remembered that as he witnessed the battle outside of Agua Prieta he had been able to adjust his vision to focus on what he wanted to see. He looked directly at the darkness and focused, and his mind reeled.

It was not a cloud that blocking out the stars; it was the bottom half of a red dress, and it was a red dress that was burned into Jose's heart and mind. It was the dress that La Catrina was wearing when he had seen her outside Agua Prieta, the dress that she wore in all of his dreams and fantasies. This was La Catrina herself, Jose was sure of it, and she was pacing back and forth alongside his truck. Now that he was aware of her presence, he could hear the dirt of the road softly crunching under her boots as she paced. He could also hear the occasional soft click and clatter of her fan folding and unfolding.

Questions passed through Jose's mind faster than he could examine them. Was she aware of his presence? Was she looking for him? Had she come to take him, to consummate their relationship? The many months that Jose had waited for her since he had last seen her flowed away like water, leaving only the present and the imperative that he be with her now. He tried to sit up, and found to his horror that he still could not move his body. He tried to call out her name, and realized that no sounds were coming out of his mouth. In tears Jose watched her pace back and forth, close enough to touch but a lifetime away. His heart torn in two, Jose surrendered to the waves of pain welling up from his leg and let them carry his conscious mind away into nothingness.

When Jose awoke the sun was overhead and the caravan was once again bouncing along the rutted, uneven road to Columbus. The Villista raid had been easily repulsed by the American soldiers from their trench underneath the trucks of the convoy, and Jose had been the sole American casualty. Pumped full of morphine and carefully placed in one of the trucks on a bed of blankets, Jose could feel no pain from his leg. The pain from his heart was a different story, however. He was sure that La Catrina had come looking for him, to take him away to be hers forever, and that because he had been unable to move or even speak she had not been able to find him. He lay on his back, tears filling his eyes and turning the sky into a curtain of blue diamonds. He cried most of the rest of the way back to

the border, until his body was dry and no more tears would come.

Once the tears were dried up and Jose knew that they would not return, no matter how much he wished them to, he pulled himself up into a sitting position as best he could. The convoy was entering the town of Las Palomas, which meant that they would soon be back in New Mexico. This brought the sadness in Jose clawing back to the front of his mind, but at the same time lifted his spirits somewhat. Jose had very much come to think of himself as American in the last few months, and so even though he had only been in Camp Furlong for a couple of weeks before the expedition into Mexico had started, still this felt like a sort of homecoming. He had also fairly convinced himself that America somehow limited La Catrina's powers, and that only in Mexico could he see her incarnate. By a peculiar, circular logic this was a relief to Jose, since if he had no hope of seeing her then he would not have to worry about not seeing her.

As the convoy crossed the border Jose had a clear view of the Mexican border guards. He was sure that they were sneering at him, and none so much as acknowledged his nod as he and the other soldiers left the land of mysticism and entered into the land of logic. On the American side of the border, the cheering crowd of civilians that had sent the expedition off in style was not there to welcome it home. To Jose's delight, however, there were two well-wishers there to celebrate his return: Ned Skelly and Grayley.

Jose had no more than waved at the two spirits when they vanished from the side of the road into Columbus and reappeared next to him in the back of the truck. They were happy that Jose was back on American soil but unsure exactly how long he had been gone, since time ceases to have much meaning in the spirit world. Skelly was surprised that Jose had been wounded in Mexico. Grayley kept poking a ghostly finger through Jose's bandages and into the wound in Jose's leg, giggling with each thrust. It was not painful to Jose when Grayley did this, but it did impart a sensation of cold to Jose that made him shiver a tiny bit in the hot desert afternoon. The two stayed with Jose all the way

from the border back to Camp Furlong. When Jose was carried off of the truck and immediately taken to see the camp doctor they went with him, standing around the examination table and listening to the doctor's pronouncements.

The doctor was of the opinion that Jose would eventually regain almost total use of his leg, although it seemed likely that there would be some lingering discrepancies, and that Jose would probably have at least a slight limp for the rest of his life. That seemed to satisfy the two ghosts, who walked out of the infirmary and vanished as soon as they had heard this pronouncement. For Jose, it was news that was only slightly less disturbing than having missed the opportunity to be with La Catrina. He was not yet even seventeen years old, and already he had been given a handicap that might stay with him for the rest of his life. He was not sure who would want him, a cripple. Would the Army kick him out? Would the railroad take him back? What woman would ever want a man dragging a useless leg along behind himself? Would he be forced to continue consorting with prostitutes? Would he have to give up American and return to Agua Prieta?

These questions and a million related scenarios played themselves out inside Jose's mind over the next week, a week that he spent at the infirmary under the watchful eye of the doctor. In the end, however, the doctor informed Jose that the leg seemed to be healing nicely, and that he would recommend that Jose be allowed to stay in the Army in a permanent light duty capacity. This was good news to Jose, who had been unable to think up a fallback plan should the Army discharge him. At the end of the week, when it was time for Jose to leave the infirmary and finish his convalescence in his own bunk in his own barracks, the colonel commanding Jose's regiment made a special trip to Camp Furlong and awarded him a medal for having been wounded in combat with an enemy. Jose thought that in reality it was a medal for having been terribly unlucky, although to say so to the colonel would have been very impolite. Instead, Jose saluted as best he could from the top of a pair of crutches and smiled.

Once back in his barracks and alone, Jose unpinned the medal from his tunic and took out the tin box which held his treasures. He felt that his new medal should go in the box with his other prized possessions relating to La Catrina, since more than anything else it was a symbol to Jose of a heart wounded by love. He opened the box. There on top was the rose that La Catrina had left in the muzzle of his rifle, still viable, fresh and fragrant. He lifted it up to his nose to inhale the sweet fragrance of the bloom, and as he did so a sparkle from within the box caught his eye. He looked more closely. There in his tin box, nestled neatly among the sugared skulls, was a small blue diamond. Jose was sure it was flawless, in the way that perfect love is flawless. He knew it was beyond value, because he would not have sold it for any amount of money. It was a piece of the sky reflected in a teardrop, just as he had seen it as he lay on the truck the day after being shot.

Jose was not exactly sure of the message that La Catrina intended to convey through this new gift, but he was at least certain it was a sign that she had not abandoned him. He could not know her reasons for not taking him, but he trusted that they were good ones. He smiled as he placed first the diamond back into the box, and then the medal he had just received. Jose still saw it as a medal for having been unlucky, but now that he had found the latest gift from La Catrina the pain of the broken heart had all but vanished. He decided that the medal must ultimately be a symbol of patience, then. A little patience, and he had found the diamond teardrop that healed his heart. A little patience, and eventually he would be standing and walking on his own again.

As the doctor had predicted Jose's leg continued to improve over the next few months, but it refused to be completely healed. The limp, also predicted by the doctor, improved and worsened in strict proportion to the pain that Jose felt in the leg. It followed some rhythm that neither the doctor nor Jose could figure out, fluctuating in a pattern that logic and science did not seem able to pin down to a tight schedule.

Since Jose was now under doctor's orders for light duty only, he had been assigned to the rifle range as an assistant. There he spent his days helping other soldiers passing through the camp to remember the basics of firing their rifles: Elbows in. Exhale. Squeeze the trigger. When he was not helping to instruct he would be in a trench at the far end of the range, using ropes and pulleys to raise and lower targets for the shooters. This was his favorite assignment at the range, since from the safety of the trench he was free to listen to the song sang by the bullets as they punched through paper and whistled overhead. Ned Skelly often joined Jose down in the trench. Ned would lay on his back on the floor of the trench, his arms folded behind his head, and stare up towards the blue sky. He claimed to Jose that he could also see the bullets themselves as they passed, since it was a different kind of experience being dead. Jose, who remembered children riding artillery shells outside of Agua Prieta, would just nod, listen to the bullets, and wait for the signal to lower the targets down to be changed.

By the end of January 1917 the Americans had decided that they had won the campaign against Pancho Villa in Mexico and were going to return home. Victory was declared, gear was packed, stockades dismantled, and ladies thanked for their services and shooed away. Cavalry troopers mounted horses and sometimes trucks and headed for the border. Infantrymen made sure their boots were snugly laced and started marching for the border. In their thousands, over several weeks, the soldiers all converged on Palomas, on the Mexican side of the border, and waited.

On February 14th, Valentine's Day, the gates on both sides of the border were opened wide and the assembled American soldiers pulled out of Mexico. Jose understood the double entendre inherent in this, and was able to celebrate in his heart as both an American and a Mexican. With the return of all these troops from Mexico, Camp Furlong was once again the sea of soldiers that it had been during the buildup for the expedition. The stream of people that flowed from the camp to the train station slowly drained this sea as units were sent back to their homes, but the rate at which troops left was nowhere close to the rate at which troops had first arrived.

It would be years and a world war away before Camp Furlong returned to the few hundred men that had been stationed there before the Villista attack, and Jose himself would be thousands of miles away by that point. In the meantime, he was busier than ever with his activities on the rifle range. All day long the men marched on and off the range, unit after unit practicing what it would be like to be killers. The bullets sang their song, the bees swarmed past over his head, and Jose raised and lowered his targets with fervor and dedication. These were happy days for Jose; he was always busy, and Ned Skelly was a constant companion in his trench to keep him from getting lonely.

Jose's nights, however, were not nearly so happy as his days. Despite the medal that encouraged him to be patient, despite the diamond that served as his reminder that La Catrina knew of his suffering, Jose could nowhere feel her presence. He tried walking out into the desert alone under both full moons and new moons, hoping the pain in his limping leg would serve as a beacon for her to find him. Sometimes Skelly and Grayley would come with him, surprised and laughing at every rattling snake and startled hare they came across, but neither alone nor in their company did La Catrina come to Jose.

Despondent, Jose tried other measures to pass the nights. A church put on a dance for the soldiers in camp to meet some of the young women in town under proper supervision. Jose decided to go, but once there he was so self-conscious about his limp that he spent the whole night standing by the snacks and ate so many cookies that he ended up sick to his stomach. Mortified at the thought that he would be known as the soldier who couldn't handle his cookies, and embarrassed by a scolding he didn't deserve about the possibility that perhaps he had snuck too much of something into his own punch, Jose passed on subsequent social events put on by the finer folks in Columbus.

His next intended refuge was a much seamier part of town, similar in nature to the stockade in the camp in Mexico. It was to this neighborhood – one block of one small side street – that the civic authorities of Columbus had decided to consign the American prostitutes who might otherwise overrun

the town with their loose morals and poor hygiene. This section of street was easily watched over by clergy and other prominent citizens in case anyone other than soldiers might be tempted to visit there, so that the wayward could be corrected. They did this in order to better fulfill Jesus's commandment that those without sin worse than consorting with prostitutes should throw stones at others.

The women stood in doorways up and down this street, each making her own foul business proposal to Jose. For his part, Jose could not stand the site of any of them. They all seemed as desiccated and as barren as the desert itself, and from every doorway crawled a mixture of the odors of perfume and fetid decay that made Jose hold his breath as he walked along. Thus it was at first to Jose's great delight that at the very far end of the street he found there La Brujita from the stockade in the camp in Mexico, with her long red hair. Not knowing in which direction was her home, she had followed the mass migration of soldiers back to America when they had torn down the stockade and then the camp and headed out. Once across the border, however, the magic that had lived within her in Mexico had apparently died. No longer could La Brujita make objects fly around the room, or even scoot across a table. Even the brilliant red of her hair had drastically faded since she had been in America.

It was immediately obvious to Jose that wherever La Brujita's true home was it was not in America, and were she to stay any longer she was in danger of becoming as lifeless and colorless and dry as the American women practicing their profession there in that narrow neighborhood in Columbus. He gave her the small amount of cash that he had on his person and walked her the few miles to the border crossing to see her safely on her way. He admitted to her that he had no clear idea where his own home was to be, either, and wished her luck in finding hers. Jose watched her cross the border, the red of her hair instantly intensifying. He felt like he might be giving up a friend, but he knew that America would not be good for her; and if he had any doubts that he was doing the right thing, the return of her hair color laid them to rest.

A few feet into Mexico La Brujita stopped and turned around. She smiled at Jose and a small dust devil started to spiral around at her feet. Jose smiled back as a stone suddenly flew out of the miniature cyclone and arced across the border. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, and Jose easily caught it. Looking down, Jose was both surprised and delighted to see that the stone was perfectly carved into the shape of a tiny skull the same size as the sugared skulls he had been saving in his tin box. Unsure of how to feel he looked up to say thank you, but La Brujita was no longer in sight. Jose waved across the border anyway, turned on his heels, and limped his way back to Camp Furlong, fingers tightly wrapped around the stone skull. This new skull would take its place in the tin box next to all of the sugared skulls, and Jose would never again visit that narrow, one-street quarter of Columbus where the mummies called from doorways and windows.

In April of 1917 America entered the Great War. Troops continued to cycle in and out of Camp Furlong, and Jose continued his work at the rifle range. Not long after Jose's first anniversary of service, in March of that year, his lieutenant congratulated him on making the rank of corporal. The Army needed leaders in this time of war, said the lieutenant. Ones that led with their legs, as Jose had demonstrated he could do the night that he was shot. Henceforth there would be new privates to raise and lower the targets at the firing range. Jose would concentrate more on teaching, turning shopkeepers into sharpshooters by balancing nickels on the barrels of their rifles.

By July of 1917 Jose's skills at balancing nickels had grown so great that Camp Furlong began to be noticed for the exceptional scores being generated by soldiers on its rifle range. Unused to the exceptional, the Army began to ask why; when the answer ultimately turned out to be the training skills of a young corporal named Joe Montoya, the Army decided that Joe Montoya could no longer stay at Camp Furlong. A new camp was being constructed in Ohio where endless thousands of men were to be trained before being shipped to trenches in France to help fight the Great War. All of those men needed

someone to teach them to shoot, and the Army thought that Jose was just the one to do it. He was ordered to report in two weeks to Camp Sherman, Chillicothe, Ohio.

It did not take Jose long to pack everything he owned into a small steamer trunk and catch the first train westbound to Douglas, Arizona, from where he could conduct his own personal expedition across the border and visit his family in Agua Prieta. He had not seen them since leaving for America more than a year earlier, but he had kept up a frequent correspondence with his sister Alba ever since joining the army. His father, still pretending to be angry with him for leaving the railroad job, would not write. His mother and Concepcion still shared the nagging suspicion that despite the piles of letters that Alba tried unsuccessfully to get them to read Jose had actually died in the battle for Agua Prieta, and that all subsequent appearances were either the work of the Virgin or of Satan, depending on one's point of view.

Alba and all the rest of the family issued a collective gasp at Jose's physical appearance when he came through the door. The slight sixteen-year-old that had run away from home was now six inches taller and a good deal more muscular than anyone remembered, the concomitant victim of military training and just plain growing up. Jose's mother, Severa Gomez, fluttered about, convinced at least for the moment that Jose walked among them in the flesh even as she was entertaining the notion that perhaps he was actually an angel; Alfonso Montoya, his father, was instantly impressed and proud of Jose, even though he tried to maintain a stern face so as not to give anything away. Even Concepcion, who had planned to turn defiantly on her heels and leave the room as soon as she caught Jose's eye, decided to stay a minute longer.

Silence draped over the front room of the house like a shadow as the family watched Jose step across the threshold. His limp, which Alba had told no one about, broke the spell. Suddenly there were questions and exclamations and a legion of voices rising and falling so quickly that they became a part

of the background noise of the universe. When the chattering quieted for a moment and everyone got it clear that his wound was sustained in combat, and that Jose had actually received a medal for it, the noise once again spiraled upward and around the front room like the dust devil that had enveloped La Brujita. Alfonso Montoya, so filled with pride that three buttons actually burst off of his vest, forgot all pretenses and gave his son the biggest hug that anyone had ever seen in Agua Prieta. Severa Gomez stopped fluttering and started to weep over her war-hero son. Concepcion withdrew to her room without so much as a rustle of her black skirts.

Concepcion was still in her room when Jose came to find her later that evening. Although she was impressed by Jose physically after not having seen him for a year and a half, she made it clear to him that she was still as uninterested in the marital bed as she had ever been since the miscarriage. This was in fact the cool physical reception from Concepcion that Jose had been expecting all along, since to his own self he felt neither taller nor more muscular nor more handsome nor more heroic than when he left, and had never in any case supposed in his own mind the question of whether Concepcion would begin to desire him if he were any of those things.

With both Jose and Concepcion feigning disappointment and sorrow, the two decided that the only proper thing to do would be to have the Church annul the marriage. Jose offered to speak to his parents and plead with them to keep Concepcion under their roof as their very own, if that were necessary. Concepcion was grateful for this offer without being effusive, since in fact she had already discussed this plan many times with Severa Gomez since Jose had ran away from home, and already knew that her position in the Montoya household was secure whether she remained a Montoya or not. The last physical contact of the husband and wife came then, when Concepcion asked Jose if she could look at and touch the scars of his wound. Jose obliged without requiring her to return the favor, and the two fell asleep with each breathing their own private sigh of relief.

Jose spent the next day with his brothers and his father, telling them about life in the American

army and answering the same repetitive questions over and over about what it felt like to be shot, and was it hard to shoot a man. Jose even led them to the outskirts of town and recounted for them the battle for Agua Prieta that he had witnessed, letting his memories be filtered through the eyes and mouth of a soldier. He left out the lieutenant that captured him and then left him for dead, and the mustachioed captain that tried to set him free. He left out how his perceptions were knocked loose from his body, so that he witnessed the battle from a spirit's point of view. And even though it made his pulse race, he left out La Catrina and how she had changed his heart and the course of his life forever.

By the time the group returned to the Montoya house, Jose was exhausted but excited about leaving in the morning to cross the border one more time and head for Ohio. Neither he nor anyone in his family had ever been there, or even knew anyone that had been. There was much discussion and speculation about the place. Someone had heard that they grew so much corn there that everyone had yellowish skin, although it was unknown whether this was caused diet or simply an overabundance of pollen in the air. Someone else wondered if there were bears there, and if so whether they could be trained, although the question was quickly ridiculed when it turned out to have been prompted by a hazy recollection of a poster advertising a traveling American circus.

Above all, everyone was concerned about the cold and snow that far north, and the different effects it might have on a man's health. Severa Gomez was in fact so worried about the diseases of the north that she had spent the day visiting various stores and vendors to find Jose the very best blankets that her money could buy. She ultimately settled on two that had particularly bright colors, so that they would stand out against the bland whiteness of the snow. This was intended to serve two purposes; not only were they to remind Jose of what a warm and colorful place his home was, but the bright colors would also let rescuers find him if he ever got lost in a snow storm and happened to have the blankets with him. Although Jose doubted that he would need the blankets for being rescued he was grateful for the reminders of home that they would provide, and he accepted them in the spirit in which they were

given. He would in fact manage to keep those blankets – survivors of piss, blood, fire, fraying, and a host of other untold insults – for the rest of his life, until they were brought to the VA hospital where he lay dying in an attempt to warm not only his legs but the spirits of his children and grandchildren.

On that night in Agua Prieta, however, no one was thinking of hospitals. After retiring to the room that he would share with Concepcion just this one last time, Jose folded the blankets into his valise, lay down on the bed of his childhood, and fell asleep. The next morning, with the practiced habit of a soldier and the excitement of a schoolboy, Jose arose well before the sun and crossed back into America.

It's July of 1917 and Jose Montoya is on the run. He is running from the warm breath of his family to an unknown fate that could suck his own life's breath away from him. He is running from a land where rabbits rule the moon and kick up dust in the desert to a place where rabbits climb and tumble across a landscape carved and molded by the advance of glaciers and made fertile by their retreat.

The train ride from his past into his future was long and uncomfortable, rolling Jose from Arizona to Louisiana to Chicago to Cincinnati over the course of two days. The trains are serpents with bellies full of soldiers, swallowed up here and there to be disgorged wherever the army says they are needed. Some of the soldiers are going to training, some are going to war, some are going home, and in their dozens and in their hundreds they pack the trains and platforms all along Jose's route with bodies, daydreams, sweat, swagger and fear.

Jose wished that he could be laying on top of the train like he used to before he joined the army, daydreaming and watching the clouds and the scenery go by. As he watched America pass by outside his window, however, Jose for the most part allowed himself to forget that he was pinned inside of a metal box and instead let his brain fill up with the strange and beautiful scenes that projected onto his

window. He watched the tans and browns of west Texas high desert turn into the green hills of east Texas, and then watched those hills melt away into Louisianan palms, pine and mangrove. From there he met the fabled Mississippi, bigger and wider than he ever could have imagined, with its fertile flood plains awash with so many colors that they looked like the paint boxes of giants.

If Memphis and St. Louis amazed Jose with their size, Chicago staggered him. Overwhelmed by the sea of people in a Union Station too small to handle the traffic, Jose alternately fought their currents and let himself be swept along by them until at last he was deposited, once again packed shoulder to shoulder, in a train that sped him south and east towards Cincinnati. The Ohio River seemed grand and stately, but on a much more human and manageable scale than the Mississippi, and Jose found himself instantly and surprisingly fond of it. He then found that the same held true of Cincinnati, as compared to Chicago: It was, for him, a much easier place to wrap his mind around.

From Cincinnati only one final, short train ride remained, and even though he was physically and mentally exhausted from his journey thus far Jose found himself taking as great an interest in this Ohio countryside as he had in any scenery the whole rest of the trip. Fields thick with corn alternated with eruptions of trees and miniature mountains of bedrock. Everywhere Jose looked it seemed like his eyes were met there by a new and different shade of green, colors that he had not only never seen before, but not even previously imagined.

The train was already nearing the outskirts of Chillicothe before Jose, suddenly mindful of the warnings and discussions of snow that had been had in Agua Prieta before he left, started to glance at the tops of the steeper and taller hills to see if any snow might be holding on up there. It seemed doubtful to Jose that there would be snow in July even at this far northern latitude, but once he had thought of it he felt compelled to check in any case. The reality of the situation was in fact quite different from anything that he and his family had posited. To begin with it was hot, as July in Ohio tends to be, and this in itself was something of a shock to Jose. There were other surprises, too. The

air was much thicker here at this altitude than Jose was used to; when he thought about it, he decided that perhaps “chewy” would be the best word to describe it. It was also more humid than anything Jose had ever experienced in his life, and combined with the heat and the density of the air he thought he almost might be able to swim up into the sky if he could just kick his legs strongly enough.

He watched with interest as the train began blowing its whistle and slithering among the wood-frame houses of Chillicothe, gliding gently to a stop at the station. The platform outside his window looked like countless others that Jose had seen over the past couple of days, packed full of soldiers and civilians and crates and containers. Ladies sat neatly on benches, like birds on a fence. Men stood around looking as important and thoughtful and concerned as they could manage. A couple of children who didn't seem to belong to anyone there ran in and out among the crowd, involved in a game of tag and happily ignorant of the disapproving looks of the adults.

Jose grabbed his valise and filed off of the train with everyone else. A sergeant waiting outside on the platform requested, in his sergeant's way, that the fifty or so arriving soldiers fall into a formation outside of the station so that he could march them a mile or so up the road to Camp Sherman. Jose tried to march with the formation, but two straight days of sitting on trains turned out to have been an unkindness to his wounded knee. The men had only gone a hundred yards up the street when Jose fell out.

The sergeant in charge of the formation allowed it to keep marching while he dropped back to see what was wrong with Jose. Short of an order to turn or to stop the formation would keep marching straight up the road, an automaton with a hundred legs. That was all right with the sergeant, since straight up the road is where he was guiding the automaton in any case, and since the camp was a ways up the road he figured he would have plenty of time to yell at the soldier that had dropped out and still be able to catch back up to the formation.

The first thing that Jose noticed about the sergeant was his tiny mustache, neatly groomed and

trimmed to the exact width of his mouth. It was the same exact mustache worn by every sergeant that Jose had ever seen in the American army, and not at all like the fine mustache worn by the Mexican federalista captain in Agua Prieta. The captain's mustache had flowed and looped and twirled in grand acrobatic maneuvers; this American mustache clung angrily and stubbornly, and was in fact small and mean-spirited in its nature. Jose was about to ask if there was a regulation that mandated all sergeants to have such a mustache, but then stopped when he realized that the sergeant was in fact asking him why cripples with bad legs were allowed to enlist in the Army. Jose didn't know the answer to that question, but he agreed with the sergeant that cripples should not be allowed to enlist, and probably not even drafted.

The tone of the conversation changed radically, however, when Jose managed to convey to the sergeant that his own limp was not congenital, but was in fact the result of a combat wound from the Mexican Campaign. The sergeant, who frequently dreamed of being shot for his country, softened when he heard this and started to ask many of the same questions that Jose's family had. Did it hurt? What was it like? How many Villistas had he shot? Jose was patient in answering each question as best he could, until at last the sergeant noticed that his formation had marched itself so far up the road that it was now not only out of range of the sound of his voice, but was even becoming harder and harder to see. With some final instructions to Jose on how to find the camp, and congratulations on his injury, the sergeant sprinted off up the road to catch his formation before it missed its turn and marched itself the fifty or so extra miles to Columbus.

Still wondering if he would be forced to grow a tiny mustache if he was promoted to sergeant, Jose started to swim his way through the humidity and on to Camp Sherman.

Camp Sherman as Jose found it in July of 1917 was still very much unfinished. Completed buildings stood among the frames of structures still in progress. Roads patterned a landscape scraped

flat, crisscrossing and going nowhere, the veins and arteries of a giant being brought to life. Telephone poles and electrical wires running down the sides of the roads formed a nervous system branching out to cover the whole camp, so that sensations could be delivered and movements ordered. Very soon this giant would come to life, swallowing hordes of young men in order to disgorge them back out as soldiers.

Jose was delighted with the scope and sophistication of the whole operation, particularly when he realized that the camp would have its very own miniature railroad to move men and supplies around rapidly and efficiently. Ned Skelly also proved to be quite fond of the miniature railroad and Jose would frequently see him riding along, perched on top of a pile of ammunition crates destined for Jose's rifle range.

Jose was also very pleased with the quarters he was assigned. It was a small room in a small barracks, but as a corporal and a member of the training cadre with responsibilities he would not have to share it with anyone. This privacy left him free to write letters to his family without distraction, which he did without fail on a weekly basis. He told them of the heat and of the humidity so dense he was almost swimming; when winter came he told them about the cold and the snow, and then in subsequent letters devoted time to answering all of the questions about snow that came back from his curious family. He told them about the eternal stream of soldiers that flowed through his rifle range, every two days a whole new group of trainees that first learned to balance dimes and then to put their new talents into practice on the range. He told them about the library at the Camp, brand new but still smelling of must from all of the donated books. He told them about the miniature railroad and its narrowly-gauged tracks that carried men and supplies all over the camp. He did not tell them about Ned Skelly's ghost, whose love for riding the train would remain incessant throughout the time that Jose was stationed at Camp Sherman.

Jose also never told his family about the ghosts of the Indians that began to turn up more and

more around the Camp. The area around Chillicothe was strewn with burial mounds of cultures far older than the Shawnees that had lived there most recently, and many of these mounds were being scraped, shoveled and steamrolled flat as Camp Sherman grew. The Indian spirits did not necessarily mind that the mounds were being flattened, and most watched the goings-on at the rifle range with great curiosity. The only one that ever actually spoke to Jose had a name that sounded, as nearly as Jose could tell, like “Juamapo”; and thus Jose began to think of him as Juan Paulo, which was close enough for the spirit.

Juan Paulo admitted to his own fascination with the growth of Camp Sherman. His own culture, which had a name long and complex enough that Jose was never able to remember it, had built not only the burial mounds that were being razed, but also ceremonial locations spread over many miles, connected by roads that were as straight and as purposeful as a taut rope. Juan Paulo was impressed by the roads that covered Camp Sherman but their layout confused him, as he was unable to determine to which stellar or solar event each road was aligned. As soon as Jose understood why Juan Paulo was confused, he set him straight with a proper explanation: Roads no longer were built with meaning in and of themselves. Now they were just a way to move people and things around more easily.

When Juan Paulo seemed to accept this explanation Jose then went on to point out the vast superiority of the railroad, which was by far the most efficient way to get from one point to another. Juan Paulo could accept that also, since the directness of the tracks was much more in the nature of the roads that he himself had helped to build. Nonetheless, it was not the miniature railroad that Juan Paulo seemed to enjoy the most, but rather the construction equipment, and the steamroller in particular; and anytime Jose happened to pass a steamroller in action, he could count on Juan Paulo being crouched behind the driver, intently studying every aspect of how to operate the lumbering machine.

If modern technology was intriguing to Juan Paulo, Juan Paulo's culture was no less intriguing to Jose. Jose, however, found Juan Paulo's conversation almost maddeningly vague when the topic was his own society. This was when Jose first discovered the riches that the camp library contained in its books, although none contained any serious details about the mounds around Chillicothe, or the culture that built them. Eventually Juan Paulo grew tired of Jose's repeated questions, and early one Sunday morning Juan Paulo guided Jose to the large earthen berm that formed a backstop for bullets on the firing range. Although the army engineers had pushed up dirt to help form this berm, they had also utilized one of the area's ubiquitous mounds as the heart of the construction. Juan Paulo instructed Jose to take a knife and dig at a certain location. Jose had not dug away more than six inches of soil when a small pipe unearthed itself under his knife. Juan Paulo told Jose to take it, and to keep it safe, and to stop asking so many questions. The pipe was made of fired clay, and was cleverly shaped like a small bird.

Even under the dirt that encrusted it Jose could see that it was also beautifully and delicately glazed, and that what Juan Paulo had just given him was in fact something to be treasured. Jose decided to accept the deal that Juan Paulo was offering in exchange for the pipe and stopped asking his new friend so many questions. From time to time he would still make a trip to the camp library to see if he could turn up anything on the mound builders, but his efforts in that regard were always fruitless; if anyone knew anything about this mysterious culture, they were keeping it as quiet as Juan Paulo himself was.

The bird effigy pipe joined the other treasures that Jose kept carefully tucked away. Even more so than for his letter writing, Jose valued his room for the privacy it afforded him in looking at his collection of treasured objects. Thousands of miles and a strange land separated him from his beloved La Catrina, but Jose kept her close in his heart. The sugar skulls that he had purchased the morning after meeting her had survived his travels undamaged, and he treasured them like he would the

photographs of her that he could never have. The rose that she had left for him in the desert was a constant miracle, never losing the bloom and never fading in either its color or its fragrance. Its scent was in fact so intense that it would fill Jose's small room in the barracks, and had a narcotic effect that made him both drowsy and dreamy.

In this state visions of her would fill his mind until the walls of his room faded away and he found himself alone with her in the desert night. Sometimes the desert floor would become a ballroom, and she would dance for him or they would dance together, spinning across the landscape until the floor became an endless bed into which they could collapse with the stars stretched out overhead like a canopy. Sometimes she would come with a flying carpet and take him up into the air, weaving in and out among the clouds, and Jose thought this was also a kind of dance, full of its own graceful turns and sailing movements as the lovers ascended and the ground receded away.

Although these reveries seemed endless to Jose as he experienced them, eventually the walls of his room would fade back in and he would be alone again, clutching his memories and a rose that would not fade.

Autumn of 1917 came, and with it came a change of seasons that Jose had never before experienced. Everywhere were reds and yellows and oranges, a natural coat of many colors on which Nature would soon exact a terrible vengeance. Although Jose felt the chill in the air and had passing thoughts about how soon the snows would come, for the time being he was content to enjoy the colors and to let himself be refreshed by the Fall air, not yet too cold but no longer stiflingly humid. It was on one such Saturday that Jose volunteered to help pick apples at a local orchard. He was not exactly sure what the duty entailed, but he had no soldiers to train at the range on that day and he thought that it would be nice to get out of the Camp and see some of the surroundings in their autumn finery.

He arrived at the orchard in an open-bed truck with other soldiers who had volunteered, surprisingly unrattled by the trip; the roads in Ohio, it seemed, were a much better surface for riding on

than the Chihuahuan desert. The trip took half an hour, and Jose spent it in a kind of reverie as the land unwound behind him. The truck pulled into a yard next to the two-story, white frame farmhouse that cornered the orchard and kept it at bay and pulled alongside another Army truck already parked there. Climbing down off of the flatbed, Jose noticed a wave of excitement ripple through his fellow soldiers. It did not take him long to see why, and then the excitement washed over him, too: There were women here. Jose quickly picked up that, in his reveries and relative isolation at the rifle range, he had somehow missed something vitally important about the Camp: It was home to an Army nursing school.

The women of the group, all nursing students except for two more matronly chaperones, had volunteered in the same various fits of patriotism and boredom to pick apples as had the men that had come with Jose. Jose looked them over with amazement and delight. Some were plump and some were slender, some were blonde and some were brunette, some had dark eyes and some light, but all looked healthy and glowing. Standing at the edge of an orchard on a crisp Fall morning, they also looked ripe and delicious.

This apparent fecundity was especially surprising to Jose, since in his mind American women had come to be equated with the collection of desiccated old prostitutes he had seen in New Mexico, dusty and infertile. Since that encounter, when he had ended up escorting the little witch La Brujita back to the Mexican border, his mind and his eyes had been closed to American women; if he saw them at all, it was only because they were efficient at bouncing light. Now, however, he felt like a curtain had been pulled back on some attraction that had previously been closed. The women from the nursing school, who as a matter of moral policy were more or less kept apart from men as much as was practicable, had much the same reaction upon seeing all the men. The eddies and whorls of sexual attraction, unnamed and unspoken, were suddenly everywhere, like the aftermath of some rogue wave.

The farmer who owned the orchard and lived in the white frame house felt the tension and

attraction rise between the two groups. He knew from long years of experience that apples were an extremely erotic fruit, and responded well to the kind of sexuality that he could now sense hanging in the air. In a hurry to move this energy out into the trees while it was still young and fresh, the farmer passed out his woven bushel-baskets as quickly as he could. He gave his simple instructions on apple-picking -- bend the apple upward, try to keep the stem on, be gentle -- and with that, the young men and women started to make their way in ones and twos and threes down the rows of pruned and twisted trees.

The chaperones who had escorted the young ladies from the nursing school, simultaneously aware of but immune to the smell of sex in the air, at first spent much energy making sure that soldiers and nurses in no way mixed as they went up and down through the orchard. This plan did not last long, as it was quickly evident to the pair that there was simply no physical way that the young men and women, who had scattered all over the orchard, could be kept segregated. They decided then that their only course of action was to split up and patrol separately, each hoping silently that they would discover some secret tryst under a tree so that the offenders could be punished. To that end they also enlisted the aid of the farmer, who had silent hopes of his own that any secret trysts would remain secret, and who thus conducted his own patrol with his eyes as firmly closed as possible.

Jose, as delighted as he was at the discovery of the women, had no intentions of trysting, secret or otherwise. Taking his bushel-basket, he set out for the furthest corner of the orchard with the idea that the trees there might be fuller, and the picking more fruitful. The day was beautiful, and perfect for thinking of everything and nothing all at once. Jose became absorbed in the process, and the fruit seemed almost to fly into his basket with practically no effort whatsoever. He did not even hear the woman behind him until she bit, as forcefully and as loudly as she could, into an apple of her own.

Jose spun around at the sound. He was startled and unsure of what to expect, but the last thing he would have expected was the young woman he found there, looking at him over the top of her apple

with big, round eyes that were more intensely blue than anything that he had ever seen. Speechless, Jose stared back. She was one of the nursing students that had thrilled him earlier, and now he felt the thrill again, only this time on a more personal level. Jose felt it as an electric connection that arced back and forth between the two of them, and as if to prove it the short hairs on the back of his head suddenly were standing straight out at attention.

Finally she took another decisive bite of her apple. Jose watched her jaws move as she chewed, and his own empty mouth subconsciously mimicked her movements. She found this funny and began to giggle and speak, but Jose felt that her words were like a wave washing up against him, and no matter how hard he tried to hold it the meaning of her words kept slipping through his fingers and receding away. He continued to stare, which made her laugh even harder. He finally became aware that her name was Eudora, and in return managed to choke out only a monosyllable: Joe. Eudora took another bite of her apple and nodded. She had stopped laughing, which would have made it easier for Jose to follow her conversation had he not been drawn back into the blue of her eyes. He tried to think of something to say but his words, like hers, kept slipping away from him.

She finished her apple and dropped the core into Jose's bushel basket. Smiling a half smile that was filled with knowledge, she turned and started to walk back in the direction of the farmhouse. Jose exhaled as if he had been holding his breath for the entire encounter. Released from her eyes and the movements of her mouth, Jose felt some sense of control return. He watched her walking away, her blond hair reflecting the sun in a myriad of shifting hues, her body curving underneath a long skirt and jacket. She looked back over her shoulder, still wearing her half smile, and called back that she liked to visit the camp library on Wednesday nights. With a safe distance between them Jose was able to understand her words, even if the only response he could give was to nod his head.

She disappeared through the trees, and Jose turned back to continue picking more apples. Thoughts of her filled his mind as he replayed the scene over in his mind. For the rest of the afternoon

nothing else occupied his mind: Not Ned Skelly's ghost following him from tree to tree in surprise, and not even the farmer who kept walking past with his eyes closed.

Jose's obsession remained with him after he returned to his room Saturday evening and through a long and sleepless night. On Sunday morning he tried to write a letter home about apple picking but found that his memories of the day could not be severed from Eudora, and after many false starts he gave up trying. By Sunday afternoon he decided that he would go to the library, full of hope that maybe she would be there. He rehearsed the meeting over and over in his mind, arming himself with different things he might say and then imagining her responses. When the library proved to be almost deserted, with no sign of Eudora anywhere other than in his mind, Jose felt disappointment wash through his whole body. He stayed until the sun set, trying to read a book about Tecumseh, until he was finally chased out by an attendant anxious to close up and go home.

The following days at the rifle range were no better. Jose tried his best to remain focused on training soldiers to shoot, but he found his attention straying frequently and his hands shaking as he tried to balance nickels on rifle barrels. On Tuesday night, back alone in his room, he took out his tin of treasures and tried to chase Eudora away with thoughts of La Catrina. The rose was still in bloom and still fragrant, but its scent failed to transport him as it usually did; if anything, the walls of his room seemed even closer and more solid than usual. Jose held the bloom in his hands for a long time, sitting on the edge of his bed and trying to marshal his memories. Unlike soldiers, however, they just wouldn't fall into line.

Wednesday seemed to Jose like the longest day he had ever lived through. He assigned a value in minutes to even the smallest task that he had to do, so that he could constantly count down in his mind the time remaining until he could go to the library. At long last all the trainees had fired their final rounds down the range and picked up all their spent casings, and Jose was free. He rushed back to

his room and quickly washed his face, and then made his best attempt at slicking back the thick and unruly hair that grew on the top of his head, a wild and tangled thicket. Pulling on his trousers and buttoning up his best-pressed jacket, Jose headed out the door.

Once again Jose practiced all his best lines as he walked to the library. At last he reached the wooden and stone building, and he stood for a moment at the bottom of the three steps leading up to the entrance with the feeling that his life was about to take another interesting turn. Taking a deep breath, he climbed the stairs. He let his hand linger a moment on the brass of the door handle before taking another deep breath and stepping inside.

His heart raced immediately. Eudora was in the reading room that opened up immediately off of the entrance, enthroned on a winged-back chair near the fieldstone fireplace. She did not look up from her book. Jose wanted to jump and shout, but immediately thought that more odd behavior on his part might not be the best course of action to pursue. In any case, jumping and shouting were not anywhere in his mental script for this meeting, and he was still determined to stay with the lines he had rehearsed over and over in his mind. He headed to the shelf to grab the book on Tecumseh that he had tried to read on Sunday. It would at least be a useful prop.

He grabbed the book, and was pleased to find that his hand trembled only slightly. He headed back toward the reading area, excited that there was an open chair between Eudora and the fireplace. Even though he tried to remain silent as he approached the empty seat, she looked up at the noise of his rustling. She flashed a smile at him, and Jose faltered slightly in his steps. He was suddenly very aware of the slight limp with which he still walked, realizing that this was in fact the first time she had seen him move other than to turn around in the orchard. Returning her smile, Jose sat down in the chair by the fire.

Eudora continued to smile, and seemed to be waiting for Jose to speak first. He felt himself once again being drawn into her smile, and decided to fight it. With as much casualness as he could

manage, he asked her what she was reading. He was pleased with the question. It was the conversational opening he had planned, and his voice shook hardly at all.

Eudora seemed pleased to find that Jose could actually speak. She held up a book on the structure of human bones and immediately began to relate to Jose how fascinating the subject of the body was to her. It was, in fact, so interesting that she launched straight off into asking Jose about his limp and whether it was due to any sort of traumatic bone injury or gross defect that he might have.

Jose felt he was on the edge of losing his nascent mastery of the situation; his injury was not in any of his imagined conversations. Once Eudora learned that his limp was the result of a combat injury, however, she seemed even more interested in learning all the details: Where did the bullet enter and exit? How big was the scar? Did it still hurt a lot? She hung on each answer, and Jose started to feel more in control of himself. He decided to throw out all of his mental scripts and just let the conversation go wherever it would.

Relating the brief events of the battle in which he had been shot, Jose tried not to be distracted by Eudora licking her lips and nodding at each detail. He left out La Catrina and her visitation as he lay bleeding in the ditch under the truck – a detail which he would never surrender to anyone, and especially not to Eudora. In any case, those events seemed dream-like and distant at the moment; the present, here with Eudora, seemed like the only moment in his life that he had ever really lived.

Eudora seemed fascinated with Jose, but her next question again caught him off guard. Why he spoke with an accent was also a subject that Jose had not covered in his mental rehearsals for this meeting, but he did not let the question rattle him. He had in fact been practicing the answer ever since he had bought his identity as an American: That he was Mexican by heritage, and had grown up in New Mexico surrounded by that culture. It was just the way people talked where he was from. He did not like having to lie, and mentally apologized to his father. He would eventually tell Eudora the truth about his background, but that night was to be years into the future.

Eudora was both surprised and delighted with his answer. She had always mentally equated Mexican with Indian, and Jose's relatively light skin tone had not led her to place him in that culture. Her surprise was not the least bit surprising to Jose, who was well aware of the story handed down through generations of his family that they sprung from the loins of an especially pale Spaniard and his particularly pale wife, and who was used to looking not quite like most of the people that he knew. Still, his skin tone was darker than hers, and Eudora had in fact begun to guess that he was possibly Italian. Trying to cover her surprise, she asked Jose if he was, then, a fiery Latin, which made them both laugh and drew a sharp stare from the library attendant.

They continued their conversation in lower tones. Jose learned that Eudora's home was barely fifty miles away in a small village named Rockville, where her father was both the postmaster and the operator of the town's only store. When America had finally joined the war in April she had felt a patriotic urge to do something. She couldn't join the Army proper, of course, but the Army Nursing Corps seemed the next best thing. She was immediately captivated by the subject matter – bodies interested her – even if still a little disappointed that she wouldn't get to shoot rifles. She claimed to be a crack shot, and when Jose informed her what he was assigned to do at the Camp the pair found another topic to easily keep the conversation going.

Eventually the time came for the library to close, and just as he had on Sunday Jose found himself being roused by an assistant eager to close up and go home. His disappointment quickly ended, however, when Eudora suggested that he escort her back to the women's quarters. He was only too delighted to do so, and the two happily wandered along the dimly-lit streets, talking and laughing until they reached the building where the nursing students were housed. Jose didn't want this time with Eudora to end, but here it was. Claiming harsh penalties if she was not inside by curfew, Eudora quickly stood on her toes and gave Jose a kiss on the cheek. Saying she hoped to see him next Wednesday, she hurried inside. Once again Jose found he had no words he could muster. He would

have limped on the way back to his room, had he not floated the entire distance.

The next Wednesday night went just as well as the first one, and so did the Wednesday following. Walking Eudora home at the end of this third Wednesday, Jose at last worked up the courage to grab her hand. The night air was cold, but her hand was warm and unbelievably soft. Jose thought for a brief second that his own hand, roughened by soldiering, must seem calloused and leathery to her. The thought quickly evaporated, however, when she squeezed his hand and turned to smile at him, and a tingling sensation shot up his arm before settling down into the bottom of his stomach. They held tightly onto each other's hands for the rest of the way to her quarters, Jose afraid that at any moment she might let go. Outside of her door, she squeezed his hand one final time as she turned to face him. Not waiting this time for her to stand on her toes, Jose leaned over and kissed her softly and briefly on the lips. Jose could not straighten back up, and their eyes lingered inches apart. All he could see was how blue they were, even in the dim light of the night, and he could not decide if it was her eyes that he wanted to fall into, or the soft warmth of her mouth.

Eudora kept her gaze still as she told him she needed to get inside, and Jose could only slowly nod. It was definitely her eyes that he that was falling into, he decided. Without taking her eyes from his, Eudora told him that she would be pleased if he would escort her to church on Sunday morning. Still mesmerized, Jose nodded again. She leaned slightly forward and returned his brief kiss, and Jose realized that he would have agreed to almost anything if it meant another kiss. She took a step backwards and told Jose to meet her here at her quarters at eight o'clock Sunday morning, and not to be late. For the third time, Jose could only nod. Eudora smiled, turned and ran into the building. Jose stood for a moment, tasting her lips and hoping he might catch a glimpse of her through a window. When no such glimpse turned out to be forthcoming, he once again floated back to his room.

Jose awoke the next morning feeling even more in love than he had the day before.

For almost three days Jose could think of nothing but those stolen kisses. It was Saturday before he realized that Eudora might not be Catholic. He had heard terrible stories growing up about the strange rituals of heretics, about how much they hated Catholics, and about the degradations and tortures that they inflicted on any Catholic they could lay their hands upon. Jose at first thought it impossible that Eudora could be such a bloodthirsty heretic, but then slight doubts began to grow. She admitted to a fascination with bodies, and wanted every gruesome detail of his injury; perhaps nursing was just a convenient cover for her. And her eyes were otherworldly, he admitted to himself. Perhaps she was possessed with a demon of some sort.

He found this thought strangely arousing, and decided that even if she was a demon or a bloodthirsty heretic, he wouldn't care. Being eviscerated on some strange altar would be worth it, if he could just have another kiss. This led him to one bizarre scene after another as he imagined the countless ways in which she might torture him. As the scenes grew ever more graphic, each more horridly fascinating than the last, another detail began to emerge in Jose's mind: At the end of every scenario, La Catrina stood waiting for him.

Finally Jose found himself caught in a scene from which he could not escape. Eudora led him into a room lit by fifty candles, and he allowed her to tie him spread-eagled against a wooden X set against a bare stone wall. Everything in the room seemed draped in red satin, shimmering in the candlelight until it disappeared into the dark shadows that made the walls disappear. Eudora was smiling at him, her lips as red as the satin, her blue eyes holding him hypnotized as they always did. A long knife appeared in her hand, curved and sinister, reflecting so much candlelight that the blade appeared to be made of flame.

She cut away his clothing with quick slashes, leaving him naked, and stepped back to admire him. Her smile and her eyes both grew wider as she once again approached Jose. He was afraid, and

he was not afraid. She sank to her knees and made a small incision across the scar from his bullet wound, and then bent her head and began to lick at the wound and the blood that flowed from it. The cut and her hungry licking were the most painful and the most pleasurable things Jose had ever felt, and he wanted her to stop and he wanted her never to stop. She looked up at him and licked her lips, and Jose smiled down at her. She stood and flicked the knife. The motion was too fast to see, but the blade left a glowing trail through the air as it sliced through his skin above his left nipple. Again she bent and tasted his blood, and again it was the most terrible pleasure he had ever known. Her pace accelerated. The knife flashed over and over, each time opening a small new incision. Each continued to bleed unstoppably, and soon Jose was covered in his own blood and beginning to feel weak. His whole body was burning with agony and with passion, and still Eudora would not stop her dive into the river of blood that was consuming him. He began to feel dizzy.

A shape took form in the darkness of the room opposite Jose. A long red dress, then a hat with dancing ostrich feathers. Long, sensual gloves. The beautiful curve of a jaw bone just visible under the wide brim of the hat. Jose's heart wrenched: Of course, it was his beloved La Catrina. She glided across the room to Jose, and tipped her head slightly back so that he could see her under the hat. Her eye sockets were inky black, and far more hypnotic than the blue of Eudora's eyes could ever be; Eudora's eyes were mortal, after all, but these sockets had seen eternity.

Eudora did not seem aware of La Catrina, and continued to hungrily lick at Jose's blood. Jose briefly worried that La Catrina would be upset with him for this indiscretion, but her wide grin put him at ease. She reached up with a gloved arm and took Jose's hand in her own. Underneath the glove her fingers felt substantial, and not at all skeletal. She pulled, and Jose's body came free from the wooden frame to which Eudora had tied him. She continued backwards towards the darkness, pulling Jose along with her. His body was light, and all of the agony of Eudora's cuts was gone, but he was growing more lightheaded with each passing moment. By the time she had pulled him to the blackness where

the wall should have been, Jose had passed out.

Jose awoke and looked around him. He was in his barracks room, stretched out on his single bed. The room was dark, but after a moment he could make out the clock on his small writing desk: six o'clock. The dream of Eudora and La Catrina was floating around in his mind, confusing in its clarity. He got up off the bed and undressed, examining himself for any sign of the wounds that Eudora had inflicted. There were none, and Jose found himself mildly disappointed. Despite the lingering smell of roses that permeated the room, it was Eudora and the agony and the ecstasy that she had inflicted on him that were staying sharp in his mind. He reaffirmed to himself and to her vision that he did not care if she was to torture him; anything at her hands would be bearable, as long as she used them to touch him.

The sky was beginning to lighten; it was Sunday morning, and Jose began to prepare himself for Eudora and her mysterious church. A quick bath later, Jose was pulling his best suit out of his small wardrobe. It was the same suit in which he had first fled Agua Prieta, and even though it seemed to have shrunk over the past two years Jose forced himself into it. Small or not it was still practically the only clothing that he owned apart from his uniforms, and he wanted Eudora to see him in it. There was just enough time to make it to Eudora's by eight o'clock, in keeping with his promise to her. With one last attempt at smoothing down his hair, Jose headed out the door.

A small crowd was gathered outside of the nursing student quarters when Jose arrived. There were soldiers in their best uniforms and soldiers in their best Sunday clothes, and young ladies in dresses ranging from Victorian elegant to pretty but simple. Eudora was among them, and ran to him when she saw Jose approaching. She was, to Jose, the prettiest of the pretty-but-simple group, and caught his hand when she reached him. It seemed the whole crowd was heading to church together,

and they all piled into waiting automobiles. Jose was squeezed next to Eudora, and the sensation of her body pressing sideways against him was almost overwhelming. He was sharply aware of each point of contact between them, from their shoulders to their hips to the outsides of their thighs. Even though the automobile was so tightly packed that she could not have moved away from this contact even if she had wanted to, Jose clutched her hand tightly for the entire ride to keep her in place. She clutched him back, just as tightly.

When they arrived outside of the church and he was able to unfold himself out of the automobile, Jose gave everything a careful eye. The building was a brick affair, plain, with a cross on top but no steeple. A stone set into the corner of the foundation read A.D. 1900. The double doors in its face were propped open, and a man stood next to each handing out the program for the morning. Jose smiled and accepted the paper. Pulled along by Eudora on his arm, Jose took a deep breath and passed through the doors.

There was no holy water in the vestibule, and no one was genuflecting. The vestibule opened onto the main sanctuary, and Eudora led him only a short way down the central aisle before guiding him into a wooden pew near the back. The back was fine with Jose, who did not want a crowd of people behind him observing all his mistakes as he fumbled through whatever rituals were to come. Eudora sat down and slid close to him on the pew.

A piano was being played at the front of the sanctuary. Its tune was strange to Jose, and it sounded more like a popular song than any music he had ever heard at Mass. Possible lyrics suggested themselves to Jose, but none were appropriate to the setting and so he let them slide out of his mind. He looked around. Crosses were everywhere displayed, a large one behind the altar echoing throughout the motif of the rest of the sanctuary. Jose found this comforting, feeling that they could not possibly be the bloodthirsty heretics of his imagination if they displayed so many crosses, even if he was slightly troubled by the fact that on none of them was displayed the battered and bloody body of

Christ that he was used to seeing.

As he was turning this fact over in his mind, everyone stood and started to sing along to the music of the piano. The words were in a hymnal which Eudora held up for him, and they were not at all similar to the ones that he had begun composing in his mind. Singing was followed by praying, a strange free-form prayer that seemed more like a one-sided conversation than the Latin intonations that he was used to. Praying was followed by more singing, which was followed by even more praying and singing. Sometimes they all stood and sometimes they all sat, but never did they kneel. Jose decided that not kneeling was okay with him, since he had noticed that the pews in this building had been constructed without kneelers anyway. Perhaps it was an oversight in construction, or perhaps it was a small mercy from God, but either way Jose was happy about it.

After a variety of songs had been sung and prayers prayed and money collected, a stern warning was given about the tiny cups of grape juice and the chalky little crackers that were being passed around. Jose decided not to sample them; he was already slightly afraid for his immortal soul, and after the threatening introduction to them he decided it was better not to risk it. Eudora had no such qualms, however, and he watched as she threw back the shot of grape juice. She immediately closed her eyes and bowed her head. She didn't look at him as she did so, but she did lick her lips once, which was enough to send Jose into his own brief reverie.

When everyone had done their shot, the mood in the building seemed to lighten considerably. A man who seemed analogous to a priest made various announcements about various things, and then used a pair of jokes to launch himself into a long lecture that seemed to be primarily about how bad of a person Jose was. Jose took it personally for a minute, until he realized that he was not being singled out; the lecture was actually about how bad everyone in the whole room was. Looking around, Jose observed that no one seemed offended by this. Instead, people were nodding their heads in agreement that yes, they were in fact bad people, just as the priest was saying. Jose did not feel like a bad person,

for all that he felt a little wicked about his thoughts of Eudora, but he did not want to be contrary and impolite and decided that he would nod along anyway. At the very least perhaps it would impress or at least please Eudora, who herself was among the nodders.

At last the lecture drew to a close. The congregation stood, and the priest invited everyone who knew that they were bad people to come up front while another song was sung. Jose glanced quickly around; no one was going to the front, and the nodders were now almost uniformly busy staring at the floor as they sang. Since he was sure that he was not any more bad than anyone else Jose joined them in staring, at least as much as he could between glances at the hymnal to try and follow along with the words. When the song ended the mood once again visibly rose, along with the rapid up-and-down buzz of everyone suddenly talking at once.

Eudora took Jose's arm and guided him out of the pew and down the aisle. Men everywhere were shaking hands and slapping each other on the shoulder, doubtless congratulating themselves on having made it through the service. At the exit, Jose could see the priest shaking hands with everyone as they left. He did not seem to be accusing anyone of being bad, and Jose was happy to discover when he reached the doors that the man was only greeting people and thanking them for coming. Jose smiled and shook his hand warmly. Would he be back? He thought so.

When all the soldiers and nursing students had piled back into the automobiles, Jose was surprised to notice that they were not driving back the same way that they had come. It didn't bother him, since with Eudora squeezed tightly next to him he actually wanted the trip to take as long as possible so that he could savor each bounce and rub of her body against his. The cars were bouncing their occupants south following the Scioto River, and Eudora informed Jose that the group was going on a picnic. This pleased Jose. Even though he was not anxious for the bouncing and rubbing to come to an end, he immediately started to construct fantasies about lunchtime along the river. Eudora squeezed his hand and smiled.

The cars pulled off of the main road and into a stand of trees. It was a beautiful late October day, and there were enough leaves remaining on the trees to give the picnickers the impression of being in a multicolored cathedral. Picnic baskets and blankets appeared, although Jose had no idea where they came from. Jose was a familiar face to several of the soldiers who had trained on the rifle range, although none of the men looked familiar to him; he saw so many soldiers on an almost daily basis that they turned into a faceless drab smear in his mind the moment they left the range. Eudora announced loudly to the group that Jose was an actual war hero, which forced him into once again reciting the details of the attack on his caravan. It was an exciting tale for the soldiers, some few of whom would be facelessly scrambled into pieces and churned into red mud in France in the coming year, the victims of a German artillery shell.

After what Jose considered a fine lunch of cold chicken and potatoes, and after all stories had been told, the happy picnickers drifted off in all directions. Eudora pulled Jose to his feet from the comfort of a blanket and the two set off through the trees. They followed the river downstream until the trees began to thin out and they found themselves standing on a long, low hill on the edge of a field with row after row of the evidence of an abundant corn harvest in months past. Just as she had pulled him up from the picnic blanket, Eudora now pulled Jose down to sit next to her on the top of the mound. Jose sat down with a thump, surprised not only at the firmness with which Eudora had pulled but also at the fact that the spirit of the Indian, Juan Paulo, was also suddenly sitting on the mound with them.

Jose felt this was an important moment, and was subtly trying to shoo Juan Paulo away when Eudora delivered her next surprise. Turning and swinging her far leg across Jose so that she was straddling him, Eudora grabbed his face in between her hands and kissed him. The suddenness and violence of the kiss forced Jose down onto his back, and Eudora followed. She was every bit as ravenous as she had been in his dream, and Jose was momentarily startled to find her tongue in his

mouth. This was the first time he had ever been kissed in this way: Concepcion would not allow it, and the camp girls in Mexico for all their friendliness had wanted to charge him more than he was willing to pay for the privilege. It was overwhelming, a sensation unlike any he had ever experienced, and his body was reacting in predictable ways.

Opening his eyes a fraction of a millimeter, Jose took a sidelong glance at Juan Paolo, who was watching the two and laughing hysterically, much like Grayley might have. He was growing fainter with each guffaw, apparently unable to both laugh so hard and simultaneously stay visible. Jose no longer cared if Juan Paolo stayed to watch or not, no longer cared for anything that might make him stop short of hurtling over the edge. Swinging his gaze back forward, Eudora's face filled his whole world, her tongue filled his whole mouth, and her whole body rubbed against him in slight but overwhelming motions. He was sure she could feel him as she ground against him. She pulled her face back from him and smiled an animal smile that matched the feelings pulsing wildly through him. On a blanket of grass covering a pile of bones, the two made love.

The following Wednesday at the library Eudora and Jose could barely manage to stay within the bounds of social acceptability. It did not take long for the two to decide to leave the library and its rules and restrictions and strike out for more fertile pastures. The night was clear and startlingly cold, and although Eudora did not seem overly bothered by it, it chilled Jose so severely that he was sure he felt his bones actually cracking. Not knowing where to go, the pair decided on Jose's barracks room. It was strictly against the rules governing nursing students that Eudora should visit male quarters, and Jose thought that it was equally against his rules that he should entertain female company, but in weighing the rules against the cold of the night and the practically non-existent chance of being caught, the rules easily lost out. Jose's quarters, isolated by the rifle range at the edge of the camp, was an excellent choice for a trysting place.

By the time they reached Jose's room Eudora's curfew was a dark deadline looming over their heads. Tongues quickly found each other and clothes dropped to the floor like serge weights and sailed through the air like cotton birds. Jose wanted to slow down, to examine each inch of her flesh as it was revealed, to examine all of her sacred places, but Eudora insistently pulled him down on top of her.

Jose's single bed creaked under their combined struggling, and within a few minutes it was all over. They lied still for a few more minutes, neither one anxious to separate their damp skin, Jose running his fingers through Eudora's blond hair until the clock dictated their time to peel apart was at hand. Jose stood and wobbled slightly, much to Eudora's amusement, who bounced to her feet and then started to gather her garments. Jose liked that she bounced and liked that she was shameless before him, making no attempt to cover her nakedness as she picked up the various articles of her clothing scattered around the room.

As he watched her bounce and bend, and began to gather his own clothes, Jose made a discovery that startled him somewhat: Beneath his underwear, which had somehow landed on his desk, was his tin box of memories and treasures. He was sure that it had not been there when he and Eudora had arrived. If La Catrina had come to watch the pair, he had not noticed the scent of roses. Formulating the idea that every orgasm was perhaps a small death in its own right, Jose then thought it natural that La Catrina should have attended. Nonetheless, Jose did not want Eudora to see the box and start asking questions that he did not wish to answer, and he quickly scooped it up and shoved it into a drawer of the desk.

Once dressed, Jose and Eudora headed out of the barracks and began the long walk back to the women's quarters. Dressed now in his warmest coat, Jose huddled tightly against Eudora even though he no longer felt the chill of the night. Their weekly ritual reasserted itself once they reached their destination, but their hug was tighter and their brief kiss more heavily laden with meaning. Jose promised that he would again escort her to church that Sunday, and with that Eudora rushed inside, safe

against the dictates of her curfew.

Jose, as always, waited until she was inside and he was sure he wouldn't get one last glimpse of her before he turned to walk away. The night was still cold, but wrapped in his coat and with an inner warmth that simmered and bubbled like chocolate Jose did not feel its bony caress. He walked aimlessly around the camp, lost in the colors of visions and daydreams that the black canvas of night only intensified.

At last he found himself back at the rifle range. Still swept along by the current of his thoughts, he walked the length of a firing lane and climbed the mound left in place by the engineers as a berm. He had not been there long when the grass on the far side of the berm rustled, and Ned Skelly sat down beside him with a thump that was neither heard nor felt. He was clutching a suitcase with both hands, and Jose's surprise at this mirrored the look that Ned himself always wore.

Ned laughed at Jose's surprise. It was in fact October 31st, and at the stroke of midnight, coming up quickly, it would be the start of El Dia de Los Muertos. Ned was packed and ready to go home to El Paso for his visit, although he admitted that the suitcase was simply for effect. Jose watched and laughed as Ned stood and demonstrated one guise after another for him, switching rapidly from Sunday best to hobo to panting dog and back again. After several minutes of this display, Ned looked up at the sky and then smiled back down at Jose. It was time to go. Flinging his suitcase upwards but not letting go of the handles, Ned Skelly flew off into the sky.

Jose stayed seated on the mound as ghostly figures of Indians began to push out of the ground around him. Some dropped bullets on the ground in front of him with a nod and sometimes a wink. Most paid him no attention whatsoever, and simply walked off into the trees. Jose wondered what kind of home they could possibly be going to, strolling across a landscape and through a culture that could no longer be recognized. Perhaps a home, if you have one, never changes. Or perhaps they would walk through modern life forever, bent on reaching a destination that no longer existed.

Jose's thoughts turned to his own home in Agua Prieta, and then to the battlefield where two years ago on this very night he had seen and fallen in love with La Catrina. He still loved her. She was inescapable and constant, his fancy lady that seemed to be always near, always watching, always tolerant. Then he thought of Eudora, and how to her he was Joe, and he wondered if his own home was now forever out of his reach, an endless walk through a culture he did not recognize.

He decided he didn't care. He decided that culture was a lie created by revolutionaries. He decided that if you walked forever, you would end up right back where you started. He decided that maybe home didn't matter, because you could at times be more confused and lost there than anywhere else, and most at peace as a stranger in a strange land.

Jose stood and filled the pockets of his coat with the bullets left by the Indians and walked back down the range to his quarters. He was only mildly surprised by the two roses that lay on his bed, which was still in disarray from Eudora's visit. The powers of La Catrina extended even here, to this cold northern place, and she was just as elusive and as forthright as ever. Two roses: Two years gone by? One for each of them, or one for him and one for Eudora, a symbol of never-mind and good will? He cut the blooms from the roses and fished his tin of treasures out of the desk where he had slid it earlier that evening. The two roses fit easily with the first one, inside his little box that seemingly had an endless capacity. And even though he was not sure what the three of them together meant, Jose had no doubt now that each would stay forever fresh and in bloom. Sitting down at the desk, he composed a letter to his family about how the weather was getting cold, but that ultimately one got used to it.

Winter came and denuded and ravished the land before giving it back a new white gown to cover its shame. After-church picnics turned into after-church snowball fights and sledding. On one particular Sunday, after all the assembled saints had been reminded of their unworthiness, when the church was stifling on the inside but outside the snow was cold and the air was crisp and the sun felt

warm on noses and foreheads, the crowd of churchgoers from the Camp bounced and slid their way to a field of drifted snow edged by a tall hill that rose up from the farmland like a single, gleaming white breast.

Jose and Eudora and the others struggled to the top, dragging sleds and stumbling and sweating into cold air. The view from the top was sweeping, rolling fields and lesser hills covered in white like sheets in beautiful disarray. Jose and Eudora held hands and looked out and then down; the hill they had just climbed seemed impossibly steep, the bottom impossibly far away. They climbed onto the small wooden toboggan that Jose had carried up. Eudora wanted at first to be in front, hanging over the edge of the hill and looking straight down with nothing to hold her but love. After a moment of thought, however, she changed her mind and her position, snuggling up against Jose's back and clutching him around his waist. She didn't want to see what was coming, and instead decided that she would hold onto love to keep her safe and shielded.

Jose started the toboggan inching forward towards the lip of the hill, to the encouraging taunts of the rest of the group. The front of the sled hung over the edge momentarily, balanced between gravity and the weight of the couple, until an inch more of movement allowed the laws of the world to assert their full force. The nose of the sled tipped, and down the hill they went.

The pair accelerated quickly. Every minor bump on the face of the hill became a ramp, lifting the two briefly into the air and causing them to cling more tightly and yell with delight as they bumped back down. Jose in the front wished that he could see more of the trip, but the speed and the glare from the snow were forcing him to squint to the point where he could see almost nothing. Eudora was pressed tightly against his back, and nestling closer with every bump.

The bottom of the hill was close and the flat expanse of the field was tilting up to meet them. A final dip and bump, larger than they could see from the top, waited patiently and then launched the two on their little toboggan sailing into the air. Jose felt Eudora squeeze him even tighter as she leaned into

him and rested her chin on his shoulder. Over the wind rushing past them he heard her sigh into his ear, and then felt her words slide into his mind like a dream: I'm pregnant.

Jose opened his eyes and smiled at the world. The toboggan continued to sail through the air, a defiant magic carpet. Jose turned himself as they flew so that he could see Eudora. Their eyes met, and silk ribbons curled out and connected them and drew them into a tight embrace. The two melted together, and in their center they both felt the tiny spark already glowing brightly. The earth continued to slide by underneath their magic carpet.

At last the two pulled apart. The hill down which they had slid seemed impossibly far away. If Eudora noticed that they had actually been flying, she was too polite to say so. Instead, as the toboggan at last settled to the ground with the faintest whisper of wood against snow, she leaned forward and gave Jose a soft kiss. You smell like roses, she said.

It was imperative that the two take a trip to Rockville, Eudora's hometown, before she started to show her pregnancy. There was no question in either Jose or Eudora's mind that marriage was their only option, and if they hurried it could be formalized and the baby nominally arrive only a little "prematurely." This particular type of premature birth was common in her family, and yet somehow the infants always seemed large even by full-term standards. These were facts that Eudora had often wondered aloud about in her teenage years. After several occasions on which her observations were met only by nervously shuffling feet, throat clearing, and stares into the wood stove, her mother at last took her aside and explained some further facts of life that she had somehow forgotten the first time around during a lecture that was based largely on farm animals.

A car was quickly borrowed for the coming weekend from a fellow churchgoers and soldier, Gerald Ebbs, even though neither Jose nor Eudora had more than the faintest of rudimentary ideas on how to drive. After brief lessons on the basics of ignition, starting, stopping, and turning, during which

Jose at first made the car lurch so badly that he felt his neck might never return to its proper shape but at which Gerald only laughed and Eudora applauded, he loaded up his valise and Eudora's luggage and the two set off. The roads were a slushy mixture of snow and partially frozen mud, and with Jose being extra cautious with both Eudora and the borrowed automobile, the fifty miles from Camp Sherman to Rockville took nearly five hours to cover.

At last, as snow began to fall through the dim headlights like an impenetrable sheet of shooting stars, the two entered the scant collection of houses that was Rockville and made their way down Columbus Street, which was as much of a Main Street as Rockville would ever have. Eudora pointed out her father's store as they passed it, a small building that looked barely large enough to house any goods whatsoever. Directly past the store the automobile bumped over a lone set of railroad tracks.

A long gentle grade down presented itself on the far side of the tracks, and the automobile had already started to accelerate downwards when Eudora told Jose that her house was directly at the bottom of the hill. Jose pressed on the brakes and locked the wheels, and the automobile began a slow and graceful slide. He turned the steering wheel left and right, but the car had a mind of its own and after rotating itself clockwise it ultimately decided that sideways was the way it preferred to descend, leaving Jose to stare over the driver's door at the bottom of the hill with Eudora behind clutching on, an unintentional replay of their toboggan trip from the weekend before.

The car and its two passengers came to a stop almost as soon as the grade flattened out, pointing at a small white frame house set not far back from the road. It looked cheerful and cozy through the snowfall, and Jose was pleased and impressed with his driving skills when Eudora told him that they had come to a stop at exactly the right place. Finally relaxing his foot off of the brake, Jose shepherded the car into the yard and cut the motor. The pair stepped out into snow that rose halfway up to their knees and worked itself insidiously into their shoes as they held hands and trudged to the back door.

The door opened onto a very small room almost filled by a washtub and completely filled by the aromas of simmering chicken soup. Eudora and Jose were still struggling out of coats and snow-stuffed shoes when Eudora's mother came around the corner, wiping her hands on her apron and wearing a smile that went from ear to ear. She immediately welcomed Jose with the largest hug he had ever received in his life. She was also one of the largest women Jose had ever seen in his life, and he was grateful when she finally released him from the hug; whatever kind of a crazily strapped and wired foundation she was wearing to support her enormous breasts had pressed so severely into his chest that he began to feel himself to figure out if any ribs had actually been broken by her embrace.

Rid of their cold and wet outer garments, Jose and Eudora followed Mama into the kitchen. Mama removed the lid from a large pot and began to stir as Eudora led Jose through the kitchen and into a small front living room stuffed with a wood stove, couch, two wing-backed chairs, and incongruously, a bright red parrot busily preening itself inside an ornamented cage. A small, white-haired man was asleep in one of the chairs, his feet on an Ottoman and a book laid carefully across his lap. Jose felt like tip-toeing back to the kitchen so as not to disturb him, but Eudora crossed the room with one bounce and laughed as she began to savagely tickle his feet. This was Papa.

The man awoke with a start, sending the book sailing through the air and directly into Jose's hands. *The Queendom of Bees*. Eudora and her father laughed, and he stood up out of the chair in which he had been napping as Jose stepped across the room and handed him back his book. Papa thanked Jose heartily and then pumped Jose's hand furiously up and down as he looked him over from head to toe. Jose's first impression of Papa as being a small man was both confirmed by his small size and belied by the energy and vivacity with which he laughed and shook Jose's hand. Jose found himself momentarily thinking about the apparent mismatch between Papa's small size and Mama's great height and girth, but then decided it didn't matter. They were both overflowing with a happiness that was tangible, and that probably made them fit together in wonderful ways that could not be

accounted for by bodies alone. Jose liked the man instantly.

The three moved into the kitchen, where Mama had already ladled out chicken soup and piled a plate full of buttermilk biscuits to a great tottering height. They all sat down around a small table, and Jose exercised great restraint as they all held hands while Papa prayed his thanks for Jose and Eudora's safe arrival, for the chicken and the biscuits, for the beauty of the snowfall, for the roof over their heads, and for Mama, who evidently not only made the soup but was also something of an expert at wringing chicken necks.

The prayer at last over with, Jose dived into the soup and biscuits. He noticed Papa dunking his biscuits in his soup, and Jose decided that it would not be unacceptably impolite if he did the same thing. It seemed to Jose like the most delicious meal he had ever had, and the biscuits hit the soup and then his mouth with a rapid regularity. Eudora watched him eat with a wide smile, and Mama seemed delighted to run around the kitchen producing plate after plate of biscuits and endlessly refilling Jose's soup bowl. Papa, despite his rather small frame, had no difficulty in keeping pace.

Many biscuits and much soup later, Papa and Jose at last leaned back in their chairs and pushed soup bowls away. Papa rubbed his stomach as if he was tenderly feeling a pregnancy. Jose felt like his eyes were going to roll so completely back in his head that he would be able to see his own brain, and he did not care at that moment if he were never to see another biscuit or taste another chicken for the rest of his life. He could not even muster enough guilt to feel bad when Ned Skelly's ghostly form appeared at the table, his surprised gaze alternating between the remnants of the meal and the hole that was forever stamped through his midsection.

Papa stood and cheerfully waved Jose into the front room while Mama and Eudora began to clear the table and wash the dishes. Although the house was far too small for the front room to be a proper sitting room, Jose briefly expected cigars and brandy to make an appearance until he remembered that this was a church-going household. Churchgoing households did not stock brandy

and cigars: The dry Christ of the North simply did not tolerate such things in the way that the bloody Christ of Mexico had done.

Papa took a seat in the wing-backed chair in which he had been dozing when Jose and Eudora had first arrived. Jose sat down in the other chair and cleared his throat. This was another scene he had been mentally rehearsing, trying out endless combinations of phrases in his mind. Now the words seemed stuck, piled up behind a dam of nerves. He decided to plunge in, hoping carefully-chosen words would dislodge themselves as he went. He began: He loved Eudora. He was a soldier and a hard worker. He would take care of her, if Papa could see fit to give her hand to him in marriage.

The house seemed supernaturally silent to Jose, and all the eyes that had been on him during his speech now swung over to Papa. As best he could without looking away from Papa, Jose guessed the count of eyes besides his own was now ten: Two each for Mama, Eudora, Ned Skelly, the red parrot, and Grayley, who had shown up at the last minute and was now snickering at Jose's obvious discomfort as he sat and waited for Papa to speak.

Papa looked Jose up and down with eyes that seemed slightly more critical than they had when Jose had first appeared in the living room. When he had done that twice he started a long speech that Jose was only mostly sure he followed, and which involved talk of armies, wars, general stores, small towns, and bees. It would be hard to be more industrious than bees, Papa said. They could fly many miles a day. They pollinated all manner of plants. And they worked so hard that they provided humans with honey and wax and still had enough left over for the functioning of their hives.

Jose nodded in agreement with each point as Papa made it. He still wasn't sure that he completely understood everything that Papa was saying, but for the time being it seemed important to at least appear as if he did. The payoff finally came as Papa wrapped up by observing that when a colony of bees reached a certain size, after having fed a new queen for some time on royal jelly it would send her out into the world with workers to help her start her own colony.

Even the red parrot appeared to be cocking an eyebrow in the direction of the metaphor at this point, and Grayley was beside himself with laughter, but still Jose sat transfixed until, with a flooding sense of relief, he heard Papa pronounce his actual blessing on the actual marriage of his daughter to Jose. His shoulders relaxed, which briefly felt good until Eudora came flying at him full-bore through the kitchen door and leaped into his lap with such force that Jose's wingback chair tilted precariously back on two feet.

If anyone in the house smelled roses at that moment, no one mentioned it.

If Jose's and Eudora's most important wedding stipulation was that it take place soon, before the baby showed, the most important stipulation made by Eudora's mother and father was that Jose be a properly baptized Christian before the wedding and not just some rogue heathen Catholic. Rockville was a very small town, after all, and people took very seriously the Biblical injunction to not be yoked together with an unbeliever; and even if Catholics were not quite unbelievers, their idol worship alone certainly condemned them to hell. When coupled with the fact that Rockville's only actual prior experience with Catholics had been the burly Baltimore & Ohio railroad crew that laid the rails thirty years ago, and that the swagger and swearing of that crew were permanently singed into the memory of most of the village's inhabitants, Jose's conversion to a true believer – whether forced, not forced, or simply near-forced – was a foregone conclusion.

Fortunately the arrival of the pair in Rockville had been on a Saturday, which meant that after a sleepless night spent so close to Eudora that he was sure he could smell her – even if he had been bedded down in the wash room, a house and a loft away -- it was Jose's great good fortune to find himself and his wild hair, still unbowed and unbroken, standing and shuffling down the aisle to the front of the First Church of Christ Rockville the next day as the congregation mournfully worked its way through verses one and three of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Jose found the idea that these people were sad over the dry Christ of the North being friendly somewhat difficult to fathom, and decided to put it out of his mind and concentrate instead on the slow processional steps he was taking down the aisle in time to this doleful music of the already-saved. The congregation, for its part, had never actually seen anyone answer a call to redemption by two-stepping to the altar, but forged ahead with a renewed determination once Jose's intention to be saved was clear to them.

Reverend Kent was nearly as surprised as his congregation that someone had answered his altar call. Getting saved in Rockville was more a matter of fact than a statement of faith; your parents went to church, then you went to church, and somewhere along the line, when the fear of hell and the imminent return of a traveling-show Jesus coming back to town became too terrifying for you, you got baptized and were saved, amen. It was such a mundane course of affairs that Reverend Kent had secretly begun harboring doubts about how much these near-automatic saves were adding to his Crown of Glory, and so Jose's approach up the aisle was such a welcome novelty that as far as the Reverend was concerned it might just as well have been accompanied by choirs of harp-toting angels and random beams of tangibly golden light.

Jose finally reached the head of the long aisle, and after vigorous hand-pumping and backslapping from the Reverend was turned to face the congregation as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" rattled to its inexorable conclusion. Everyone was now wearing benevolent smiles as they gazed at Jose. Eudora's smile was the best and brightest among them, and Jose was so afraid that he would become lost if he stared too long at her delicious mouth that he started forcing his gaze to rapidly swing back and forth from Mama to Papa to Eudora and then back again. In this semi-hypnotic condition it was only distantly that he heard the voice of Reverend Kent running through Bible verses and asking questions, with his own equally-distant voice answering them.

At last the spell was broken by more vigorous hand-pumping from the Reverend as he guided

Jose to a back room to prepare for his baptism. Once in the back room, Jose was surprised to learn that he had to strip completely naked before pulling a heavy white cotton robe over his head, while the Reverend instead simply stepped into hip waders to protect his suit before donning a similar robe. This puzzled Jose, who very much would have liked a pair of hip waders, too, until the Reverend pointed out that it was symbolic, and that like a naked newborn baby Jose was being born again. It was a pretty swell idea, and Jose didn't allow himself to dwell for more than a moment on the fact that newborn babies always made their first appearances covered in blood and gore.

Properly draped in their robes, the two men exited the back room through a side door which opened to three steps leading down into the baptismal. The congregation, which had seated itself while the two men robed, once again stood and resumed its benevolent smiling as first Jose and then Reverend Kent descended the steps to stand together in the waist-deep water. The Reverend gave a very brief speech about the spiritual significance of baptism, but since the water in the baptismal was very nearly ice-cold it was a shorter speech than it otherwise might have been. With a movement practiced innumerable times while he was a student at Charlottesville Bible Seminary, he swiftly threw one arm behind Jose's back and with the other hand pushed on Jose's forehead, levering the soon-to-be newborn off of his feet and into the water.

Jose had been unprepared for this sudden physical immersion. He instinctively held his breath as he went under, but his eyes hardly blinked and he watched the displaced water slowly roll back to cover his sinking head. The water seemed thick to Jose, like gelatin, and with a sudden rush of excitement he realized that he was once again moving through the world in a time outside of time. It could mean only thing: She was here. She had to be. La Catrina.

If Jose was moving faster than time, Jose's thoughts were moving even faster than that. He thought about the first time he saw La Catrina in the desert. He thought of her grace and elegance and her sheer eroticism. He thought of how often he had longed for her, how often he had missed her, and

how much he had longed for her to take him.

The gelatinous water covered his face, settled, stilled, cleared. His eyes focused and his heart raced: It was indeed La Catrina who held him cradled under the water, one arm behind him holding him up and one bony hand encased in a long black glove at the base of his neck holding him down. Her red dress, too tight against her womanly hips to billow, instead seemed to flow into a stream of bright arterial blood that did nothing but make being under water seem both more festive and more sensual.

For a long moment she held him, and Jose hung there in the time out of time. Her eye sockets, swirling blacker-than-black, looked down at him, and he wished his own eyes could be that black instead of crap-colored brown. He wondered if she was here to take him, to finally claim him as her own. Then he wondered how it would happen: Would she hold him under the water until he had no more mortal life? Or was his mortal life already extinguished under this syrupy water, and he was to spend eternity with her just holding him against her hips?

But no. With the arm behind him she was pulling him up, and suddenly his face broke the surface of the water and his ice-water-numbed feet regained the bottom of the baptismal. He wiped water out of his eyes as Reverend Kent clapped him firmly on the back, and with hair that somehow managed to still be standing straight up from his head even though it was soaking wet Joe Montoya turned and faced the smiling congregation, born again. They were a dry, lifeless, bloodless, colorless lot, Jose thought, except for one: Eudora.

If Eudora smelled roses during the baptism, she never mentioned it.

The wedding was planned for the month following Jose's baptism, and it was also to take place at the Rockville church. The guest list included family members of Eudora's, who would come in from as far away as Cincinnati, as well as the small circle of friends that Jose and Eudora had in Chillicothe. The Montoyas would not be coming from Mexico, since in none of his letters filled with descriptions of

snow and other northern oddities did Jose ever mention Eudora until it was too late for them to attend.

Eudora stayed in Rockville not only to plan the wedding, but also because the nursing school had quietly but firmly reminded her that the duty of a nurse was to her patients, and not to a husband; as a woman who would lately find herself to be a wife, then, her presence at the school was no longer required. This was a blow to Eudora, but it was a blow which she decided to let stiffen her instead of break her. Her textbooks were her own purchased copies, and she planned to continue studying them on her own. Like many good plans made by good people throughout human history, for the rest of her life Eudora would occasionally remember her plan and take the more obscure books out of the closet to blow the dust off and briefly peruse them, confident to the end that at any time she could pick back up in nursing school right where she had left off.

Jose went back to Camp Sherman, but the captain commanding his unit did not view marriage nearly as ruinously as did the nursing school. Just like there had been at the church in Rockville owing to his salvation, so too there was much backslapping in the captain's office over Jose's impending nuptials. The captain, eager to keep Jose happily churning out the finest marksmen in all the war, not only congratulated Jose but as a sort of early wedding present promoted Jose to sergeant right on the spot.

For Jose, this was a dream come true: At long last he would be able to start growing a fine moustache, much better than the kind of mean moustaches that sergeants usually wore; and even if it would never have the fine loops and curls of the moustaches that officers were allowed to wear, nonetheless Jose's moustache would become a symbol of manhood and achievement that for the rest of his life would thrust straight out from his lip in much the same manner that the hair on top of his head always seemed to be standing proudly at attention. Full of visions of his future mustachioed splendor, Jose first saluted the captain and then pumped his hand profusely before running out of the captain's office and three quarters of a mile down the road to his own barracks to see if his moustache stubble

had already started to grow.

The wedding at a month away seemed impossibly distant to Jose, but the daily ebb and flow of trainees in and out of his rifle range kept his mind occupied with familiar business. If anything seemed to change, it was nothing more than the fact that tulips were starting to poke up through snow cover, and that Ned Skelly, Grayley, and Juan Paolo had taken to teasing Jose by frequently slapping each other on the back and furiously pumping handshakes up and down ever since the trip to Rockville.

The day of the ceremony found Jose getting ready in the back of Papa's store next to the railroad tracks and up the hill from the house, which had been forcefully claimed by the bridal party even though Jose had never thought twice about commandeering it for his own preparations, which were in fact few: Wash. Try to smooth hair down. Get dressed. The washing and the getting dressed had been easy, but true to its nature his hair had been wildly obstinate and refused to cooperate with being slicked back. After a forty-five-minute struggle, the best that Jose could manage was to get his hair to agree to a part down the middle of his head, from whence it stuck straight out sideways and then curved upwards as if he were an odd sort of suave water buffalo.

At last, surrounded by Eudora's anxious Papa, Gerald Ebbs, and two other church-going soldiers from Camp Sherman, Jose stepped out of the store for the short walk up Columbus Street to the Rockville First Church of Christ. Ned Skelly and Juan Paolo were waiting for him. Jose noted with relief that Grayley was not among them. Grayley's non-stop giggling was far more trying on Jose's nerves than the big hole through the middle of Ned Skelly, and Jose had asked Grayley not to be visible at the wedding so his jitters wouldn't be any worse than they already were. The upside for Grayley was that without having to spend the energy to make himself visible he was able to project that much more into the physical world, and was finally able to muster enough wherewithal by the time of the reception to actually pinch Eudora's cousin Sarah on the backside, causing a minor but thankfully brief

misunderstanding by the punch bowl.

Once at the church, Jose and his groomsmen – minus Gerald Ebbs, who had driven his car back down the hill to get Eudora and her party – were immediately met by Reverend Kent and ushered into the very same back room where a month ago Jose had had to strip naked in order to prepare for his second birth. The night before, at a brief rehearsal held at Eudora's insistence, Jose had had a momentary panic that he would once again have to strip. He was prepared to face this requirement with dutiful determination, if that was what he needed to do to marry Eudora, and was quite relieved when it turned out that this time the room was just a convenient place from which he and his groomsmen could file into place at the start of the ceremony.

The wait in the backroom seemed much longer to Jose than what had been promised to him during rehearsal, and when Gerald Ebbs finally came in it was discovered that the car carrying the bridal party had very nearly not made it up the hill and over the Baltimore and Ohio tracks, owing to the mud of a late winter thaw making Columbus Street difficult to ascend. It was only Gerald's superior driving skills that had gotten the bride-bearing automobile up the hill, it seemed, for which Jose was to always be sadly grateful to him. It simply would not have done for Eudora to have had to have clambered barefoot up the hill through the icy mud, her good shoes in one hand and her wedding dress hiked up around her knees like a woman of no other means. It was a gratitude so enduring that Jose would have it for long after he began to be visited by the apparition of Gerald Ebbs, with his oddly stretched and bruised neck.

At last the church pianist began to play something that sounded for all the world like "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and Jose two-stepped out of the back room. Because this part of the rehearsal had been rushed through, it was to the delight of some assembled in the church -- and to the confusion of many others -- that the groomsmen followed Jose's lead and also two-stepped, creating an oddly bobbing and weaving procession from the back room to the altar. Mercifully the distance they

had to cover was short, and even in syncopated rhythm the gentlemen pulled up in front of Reverend Kent in less than the time it would have taken for the congregation to moan out even a single verse of the hymn.

Jose and his party stood awkwardly at the front of the church, Jose because he was understandably nervous and his groomsmen simply because none of them especially enjoyed standing in front of crowds, and it was not until Reverend Kent caught a glimpse of Eudora and nodded at the pianist to begin pounding out “Here Comes the Bride” that any of them found themselves able to breathe again.

Eudora was preceded by two of her friends from nursing school, one cousin, and a toddler barely old enough to walk who came first up the aisle, scattering rose petals as she did so. The scent of the roses made Jose dizzy. The thought crossed his mind that as far as he had been told it was going to be tulip petals that were strewn, not roses, and it was only with great difficulty that he was able to retain his focus until Eudora, beaming at him from Papa’s arm, finally glided into sight. She reached the front of the church, detached herself from Papa, and faced Jose as he took her hands into his own.

The scent of roses drenching the air continued to rise as the ceremony progressed, and although no one else seemed to be bothered or even to notice, Jose felt he was in constant danger of floating away to some desert place where bones became flesh and carpets flew like aeroplanes. He would never be able to say how he would have made it through the wedding had he not had Eudora’s eyes to stare into and the touch of her hands against his as a grounding physical reality. But make it through he did, and when at last he got to kiss the bride – with no tongues involved this time, as Eudora had insistently demanded after a brief episode at the rehearsal – he felt like a dream had slowly evolved its way into reality in a way which his wedding mass to Concepcion never had.

Yes, this was real now. He was Jose Montoya, husband, and would soon be Jose Montoya, father. It was real, he was awake, and his life was about to begin.

It's November of 1918, and Jose Montoya is no longer on the run. He is in fact quite stationary, happily ensconced with a happily pregnant Eudora in a small wood-frame house that stood somewhere amongst numerous other, identical wood-frame houses built row after row in Chillicothe, outside of Camp Sherman. He's entitled to the house as a married sergeant, and although in truth it isn't much of a house – the kitchen and the living room are in fact the same room, and the tiny bedroom is the only other room to the house – it's a home. Jose happily gave up his barracks room by the firing range in exchange for this house, and now limped to the camp and rode the miniature train around it every morning until he finally was able to jump off at the range as the train passed it by.

If anything sullied Jose's happiness, it was the threat of influenza that hung over Camp Sherman like a great putrefying cloud. Spanish Flu had been raging its way across the country and around the world since the previous spring, and when it finally arrived at Camp Sherman in force it barreled its way through the soldiers like engineers cutting through Indian mounds, sweeping away almost twenty men in September and more than a thousand others in October. In Eudora's eyes it was a crisis of nursing that most likely stemmed from a failure of nursing. She argued with Jose that were she to volunteer to aid in this smaller war she would doubtless raise the standard of nursing care in the Camp, but at seven months of pregnancy both Jose and her own common sense trumped her desire.

This frustrated desire to heal in Eudora was so intense and so compressed into such a short period of time that it was in fact to coalesce into a diamond inside of her abdomen. She would bear it there the rest of her life, where it would cause her not only great physical discomfort but also be the source of her miraculous powers to both kill (chickens) and to heal (children). She would ultimately become so adept at the use of her powers that at her peak she could set and fuse broken bones just through a firm grasp on the affected area, and cause chickens to fall over in their tracks with a simple glance.

As November began to rise from its austere sleep the influenza outbreak continued unabated. Health officials had banned all indoor public gatherings, and turned theaters into makeshift morgues to handle the horrifying industriousness of the disease. Jose often wondered whether La Catrina walked between the narrowly-spaced beds, tapping some men with her fan and passing others by as her whims dictated. He would get pangs when he thought of her like that, because such thoughts reminded him of the way that he used to feel and the dreams that he used to dream, but he no longer ached to be one of the ones that she called to herself. Still, when a wagon full of stacked bodies would pass him on the cold mud roads of the Camp he would breathe deeply and smell for the scent of roses. It was a scent that he was never to catch during the carnage of the flu. Neither did Jose ever see any of the spirits of the departed, although Ned Skelly reported that most of them were as surprised at their personal turn of events as he himself had been at his own death: After four years of war people had forgotten that disease, although not as efficient as machine guns, was in the end just as effective.

The Great War was essentially over; it seemed it would be no more than a matter of days before the German capability to fight was completely broken. The Army, because it knew more about fighting wars than about fighting influenza, had decided several months earlier that because the end was imminent even more soldiers should be crammed into Camp Sherman and trained to shoot. This left Jose with ever more and longer days of teaching new soldiers how to balance nickels on their rifles to steady themselves. It was not a task that he took lightly, but fortunately neither was it a task that was onerous to him. The only downside was that it kept him away from Eudora, and as her due date in the middle of November grew closer and closer Jose grew more and more anxious during his long days out at the range.

November 11 dawned so crisply that it cracked like a rifle shot, startling and amusing Jose as he climbed off of the miniature train outside of his range headquarters and headed inside the spare wood-frame building to prepare for another week. It was six a.m., and as happened every Monday a squad of

four or five recruits would soon be showing up to help lug cases of ammunition from the train into a storage bunker a couple of hundred yards away. The recruits that came were always glad that they had done so, because by its nature ammunition-lugging was a much better assignment than many others that they could have drawn. They were also glad because unlike many of the other corporals and sergeants that glared them down on a daily basis, the recruits invariably found that Jose treated them with respect and dignity.

On Jose's part the kind treatment of each week's recruits occurred because it was simply his nature to be kind. He was in fact still unaware at this time in his life of the kindness that was built into his character, and actually had some concerns that the sergeant's moustache he was growing and carefully trimming to the corners of his mouth was making him somehow meaner. Kind or not, Jose was always grateful for the efforts of the recruits, because on cold mornings like this the scars on his leg would glow an unearthly pink and the pain cause his limp to noticeably appreciate until he was able to sit down to lunch in the noonday sun and let its healing heat restore him to full mobility.

By seven a.m. on November 11 most of the ammunition had been stored away in the bunker except for that allotted for the day's training usage. Jose had made the recruits coffee after their detail while they waited for the rest of the company to march to the range to begin training for the day, which was another reason that he was well-regarded: It was a rare treat for men at this stage of their training to be allowed to sit idle and do nothing other than drink coffee and talk about the news and hearsay from Europe. The German navy had mutinied, and the German people were very nearly in open revolt.

At just about the same moment that the discussion turned to Kaiser Wilhelm and his abdication of two days prior, Ned Skelly appeared outside of the circle of men and motioned emphatically for Jose to come closer. Jose smiled, excused himself from the recruits, and stepped out the door onto the narrow porch that fronted the range building. Ned Skelly reappeared there next to him, waving a ghostly newspaper in front of Jose's nose that had only one large, single-word headline emblazoned

across its width: Armistice. Jose steadied himself against the porch railing. He had never had such momentous news of the physical world broken to him via spirit before, and he continued weighing the significance of that fact as he watched the company of recruits come marching up the dusty street for their training at the range.

As it turned out they were of mixed emotions, the men of that company, because the captain that commanded them had already told them in their morning formation about the armistice in Europe. It would not be officially announced to the American people by the government for several more hours, but nevertheless a fact was a fact. Some of the men were relieved that their lives had likely been preemptively spared by the end of fighting, and relieved that they would likely be allowed to go their whole lives without having to feel obligated to kill another man. A surprising number of others, however, were grumbling about that very same fact. A very few of those men, young enough and fluproof, would mark time in the army until the next chance at killing people came along twenty-some odd years later, when at last they would find happiness in the midst of so much sorrow.

For Jose, however, who saw plenty of dead men on a daily basis and didn't feel the need to create any more, the morally uplifting news of the armistice was tinted around the edges with colors of a more practical concern. Since his first week in the army his career advancement had in one form or another been driven by overt acts of people shooting other people, and the need for an army of so many soldiers seemed suddenly questionable to Jose without that background and without the moral imperatives of vengeance – because despite the fact that vengeance might belong to bloody Jesus first, it was claimed and enacted more immediately by governments and revolutionaries.

Jose's reverie was short-lived, however. One of the camp motorcycle messengers, used by officers and sergeants who either couldn't bring themselves to trust the camp telephone system or who simply liked the rumble of the machines, was roaring up the road on his Indian, dragging a tail of dust and pebbles behind him as he came. The motorcycle companies in the camp – of which the division

actually had several – were in fact just as much in training as the recruits that now stood before Jose to learn how to shoot. They considered themselves a different breed from the regular infantryman, however, and when he stopped to think about these motorcycle trainees Jose saw much in them that reminded him of his days in the cavalry. He also saw much that amazed him in how rapidly the Army had taken to all of the varying mobile machines, given that it had only been two years since he was bouncing along through the desert on machines that the army then considered entirely experimental. He also was never able, although he tried several times, to explain to Juan Paolo the irony that he felt when he realized that the motorcycles were largely made by a company called Indian Motorcycle.

None of that crossed Jose's mind, however, as the rider rounded the formation of trainees and came to a stop in front of Jose with only minimal sliding. He had orders from Jose's captain to fetch Jose, leaving the recruits to wait until a replacement could be sent out to operate the range for them. Jose was reluctant to leave his post at the range when there were men to be trained, but as soon as the messenger made him aware of why the captain had sent a rider instead of simply telephoning Jose jumped from the porch into the motorcycle's sidecar in one gracefully acrobatic moment: Eudora was in labor.

The air in his face was stingingly cold, but as they bounced down the dirt roads of the camp to the main gate and Chillicothe Jose still wished that the driver of the motorcycle would take him faster than the prescribed twenty-five-miles-an-hour maximum speed. Nonetheless, as long as the trip seemed it was hardly ten minutes before the motorcycle was pulling up in front of his little house, and once again Jose performed feats of acrobatic by this time vaulting out of the sidecar before the messenger had had his chance to bring the machine to a slow and elegant stop. Juan Paolo, who had also ridden along on the motorcycle studying its operation like he studied the operation of the steamrollers, approved of Jose's athleticism and decided to do his own vaulting dismount, adding a floating midair somersault for effect. Jose, however, was already up the four porch steps and to the front door before

Juan Paolo accomplished his aerial maneuver, leaving it as just another of the unseen feats of the dead which litter the world of the living.

Jose paused at the top of the steps, suddenly gripped by a strange sense of decorum. He turned the doorknob of the front door, swung it slowly open, and stuck his head inside to make sure he could safely enter the front room. No one was there to greet him, but from the bedroom that opened off of this room he heard low voices of encouragement that were suddenly punctuated by a grunting cry that could only be coming from Eudora. Still trying to maintain decorum, Jose crossed the room in three long, bounding strides that were as close as he could come to running without actually doing so.

He slid to an awkward stop at the bedroom door, suddenly unsure whether he should crash in for dramatic effect or try to sneak in so as not to be a disturbance to the proceedings. With his mind embroiled in this ridiculous debate his body decided to take matters into its own hands, and he turned the knob and nudged the door enough so as to allow first his hair and then the rest of his head entry into the room.

Eudora was flat out on the bed except for her drawn up legs, forehead beaded in sweat and her hair damp even though the house had decided to participate in the November chill. Caroline the midwife and her assistant stood at the foot of the bed with their backs to Jose. Caroline seemed to feel more than see or hear the moment when Jose entered the room, and since between the legs of a woman was no place for a man to gaze quickly ordered her assistant to escort Jose back to the living room.

Jose, chastened and wishing that he had committed more to sneaking into the room, did as he was told and drew up a chair next to the stove in his joint kitchen and living room. Four pieces of coal into the stove later, at exactly 11:00 a.m., Eugenia Montoya was pushed out into the world. She arrived pursed-lipped and silent and disapproving of the whole noisy affair, and when Jose was finally allowed back into the room to see his daughter for the first time the only due she would give him was to raise one skeptical eyebrow at him as Caroline held her up for his approval.

It took the Army only a matter of days to realize that with no one left to fight they needn't be training and paying so many men to march, shoot and die of Spanish Flu, which after all couldn't be shot. Camp Sherman, which had engorged itself with a constant stream of recruits and which now comprised thousands of buildings spread across its many square miles, would make as fine a place to dismantle soldiers back into civilians as it had a place to assemble soldiers from civilians, a symmetry that somehow pleased Jose even though it meant that as 1918 ground into 1919 he spent many of his days helping the Discharge Detachment process paperwork.

But while the symmetry of process pleased Jose, the symmetry of cause and effect between teaching people to fight and the devastation that could be wrought on a human body did not. Jose, who was used to passing the time with the spirits of men who had holes in their middle and in their head, was saddened at the constant procession of the maimed that wound its way from the large stage of a devastated France to the small stage of a town in Ohio. These were men who suffered in ways in which Ned Skelly and Grayley hadn't, and the pain that Jose carried in his own leg could only let him imagine that much more clearly what it must be like for these men blinded by poison gas and hobbled by missing limbs, many of whom now lived permanently in a muddy and freezing trench dug for them by their own minds with a cunning far more powerful at digging than any entrenching tool would ever be.

The Discharge Detachment was a model of gray efficiency capable of sending thousands upon thousands of soldiers a month out the door and back to whatever remained of their former civilian lives. Instead of nickels balanced on rifle barrels it was now fingers balanced precariously on his typewriter as soldier after soldier came and sat next to him, handed him papers they had filled out, watched more or less silently as he typed, said everything looked good, and then variously walked or limped or rolled to the next station, making way for the next soldier in line in an endless, tedious stream.

If his post-War days now seemed longer, grayer and more trying to Jose, though, his life at home with Eudora and baby Eugenia was both brighter and more mysterious than it might otherwise have been. It seemed especially bright to him because Eudora's body, changed since pregnancy and parturition, was like a strange and completely new continent that she was eager to have him explore as often as possible – which was often indeed, given their youth and mutual enthusiasm.

Like most new parents they were likewise united by Eugenia, who presented them with her own unique set of mysteries. Chief among her mysteries was the fact that not once had Eugenia ever cried, or indeed even made more noise than an occasional tsk-tsk with her tongue. She seemed healthy, though, and all the usual tests confirmed that her hearing and other senses were perfectly fine. For lack of anything better to say, the private doctors in town and the Army doctors at Camp Sherman to whom she was brought all ended up providing the same diagnosis: Eugenia was simply extraordinarily well behaved.

In point of fact, however, the true diagnosis of Eugenia's condition was simply that she was born bearing a general disgust for life and all its attendant messiness. Although Eugenia would begin to suddenly speak in a very preternatural and precocious manner at the moment of her brother Alphonse's death, it would take Eudora and Jose several more years to understand that Eugenia's silence had never really vanished, but had instead been simply covered over with words. It would be most painfully evident to Eudora, for whom Eugenia seemed to harbor a polite disdain that ran deeper than the skepticism with which she generally regarded her father; but it was noticeable to even the other children with whom she grew up, and who would give her the nickname of Spooky long before the boys around her started to describe her in terms of haunting beauty.

If Jose and Eudora were skeptical of Eugenia's diagnoses of simply being well behaved, they were also simultaneously grateful that, while most parents they knew were listening in fear for their

own babies to sneeze after coming down with the Spanish Flu, they themselves were listening for Eugenia to make any noise at all after her apparent outbreak of good manners. Indeed, so quiet and easy was Eugenia that Eudora, after listening for four months to Jose talk about the stream of invalids and convalescents that he observed nearly every day, and listening in vain for Eugenia to make a sound other than tongue-clicking, decided that she would volunteer at the rapidly growing convalescent center on Camp Sherman, where nursing help was so in demand that at the moment they didn't care whether a volunteer had been booted from the Army Nursing Corps or not.

Jose was at first opposed to such an arrangement on the grounds that Eugenia needed to nurse throughout the day, and that Eudora being a working mother would simply never do. The matter hung between Jose and Eudora for a week before Eugenia, tsk-tsking as was her wont, decided it for them by suddenly refusing to nurse and instead only taking a mixture of cow's milk, cod liver oil, and – at the assistance of Papa on a visit to Rockville – honey. Faced with the erosion of the only ground on which he had been able to deny Eudora, and reminded daily of the growing need for care, Jose at last relented.

The decision was made more palatable for Jose by the fact that Gerald Ebbs was now also assigned to Camp Sherman's convalescent center, and was more than happy to pick the couple up in the mornings and drop Jose at the Discharge Detachment before continuing on with Eudora to the convalescent center. It was an arrangement that minimized the time that the young parents had to spend apart from Eugenia, on whom they doted despite her unexpressed disapproval. It also allowed Jose to be more at ease on the occasions when the volunteer work at the hospital required Eudora to stay late; even if he himself had to walk home, at least he could do so in the knowledge that Ebbs would safely deliver Eudora without her having to walk home alone through the darkness.

It was a sad fact that the rides would not long continue. Gerald Ebbs had been in love with Eudora since she had first come to the nursing school on Camp Sherman. He had sat behind her in

church her first week, observing every bob and quiver of the back of her head, catching his breath every time the congregation rose and then sat as her backside gracefully thrust and arced in front of him.

The following Sunday he watched and waited, and by a carefully timed greeting and introduction he contrived a seat next to her in the pew as the congregation began the service with an enthusiastic “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” verses one and two. He sang the hymn with extra volume that day, since he was aware that he had a fine singing voice, and he couldn’t help but notice as he did so that Eudora not only had a fine voice, too, but was also capable of harmonizing without being shrill. It was, thought Ebbs, a match truly made in heaven.

Ebbs spent the next many months insinuating Eudora into his circle of church-going friends, planning outings and figuring out how to pack everyone into his car so that he could extend his time with Eudora beyond Sunday service without attracting any suspicion. He had almost got up the nerve to ask if could privately call on her when she appeared one Sunday with Jose in tow. Ebbs was crushed like felt on the inside, but he decided that outwardly he would take the high road and bide his time when it became obvious that first Sunday that Jose was not half the singer that he, Ebbs, was.

Eudora insinuated Jose into the group of church friends as neatly as Ebbs had insinuated her. It was impossible not to be charmed by Jose and his buoyant spirit, even if at the same time Ebbs’ spirit was sinking ever lower, and Ebbs found to his ultimate dismay that he genuinely liked Jose. Each Sunday Eudora seemed a little further gone, until one particular Sunday when the two disappeared through the woods along the Scioto, each of them bearing a healthy glow when they ultimately returned to the group.

It was then that Ebbs knew he had played it wrong and had lost to a charming Mexican who limped and couldn’t carry a tune. It was a loss that Ebbs continued to bear graciously, lending the two his car so that Jose could ask for the blessing of Eudora’s father for marriage and even going so far as

to drive the bride to the church on her wedding day so that the ends of her wedding dress didn't muddy, and then standing up for Jose in the wedding party. He watched Eudora's body fill and her belly swell over the course of her pregnancy, and then cooed at little Eugenia while thinking that she wouldn't have been such a strange little child had she been the offspring of him and Eudora. And he jumped at the chance to drive Eudora to the convalescent center every day, because it meant that he would get to spend time with Eudora every single day.

The time with Eudora proved to be unhealthy for Ebbs. Over the course of long days spent with Eudora and without Jose close at hand other than on the short car rides, Ebbs found that his feelings for the new mother was growing both rapidly and steadily. In the sad paths that hopefully melancholic minds sometimes take he also began to convince himself more with each passing day that Eudora reciprocated his feelings, stirred up by each incidental touch or passing smile that came his way.

On the last night of his life, as he drove Eudora home through the late-winter darkness of a night on which they had both stayed late at the convalescent center, his feelings and his certainty became too much for Ebbs to contain any longer. Keeping his eyes straight ahead, he reached his right hand over and tried to run it up Eudora's leg under the hem of her coat. The attempt was bumbling and crude and rather rougher than he had intended, and he only got as far as Eudora's knee before her icy-cold hand grabbed him around the wrist and thrust him forcefully away. Chastened by the rejection and himself terrified of what he had done, Ebbs continued to look fixedly ahead and neither party spoke, the silence sitting between them like a tangible witness of what had just occurred.

Eudora wordlessly got out of the car when they arrived at the Montoya house and went inside without a look back, her coat wrapped tightly around herself.

Ebbs went back to the private barracks room he was entitled to as a sergeant with a fine moustache and put some coal into the small stove in the center of his room before getting up on a chair to loop one end of a rope over the support beam in his ceiling and the other end around his neck. He

had come this far before and it felt good, thinking of Eudora's soft body until he teetered on the edge of everything. On this particular night, though, the last night of his life, he would go over the edge amidst the overwhelming scent of roses and a starry euphoric burst. In all the many times he was to appear to Jose after this night, his neck oddly stretched and bruised, Ebbs would never say whether the chair had been kicked over on purpose. He would, in fact, never say anything at all to Jose, nor offer anything other than a sad smile.

Eudora chose to maintain her own silence and never revealed the incident with Gerald Ebbs, but the night of his funeral was filled with a special kind of frenzy that led, nine months later, to the introduction into the world of Alphonse Montoya.