

El regalo del abuelo (Abuelo's Gift)

Qaaaaak qakqak

Thunder

Chased lightening down the volcano

Sparks flew, like the snapping heels of a caballero,

Down Popocatepetl, her mountain.

Rains ... fed wild roses and plumeria.

Cougars ... ripped the carcasses of deer

And eagles snared scared rabbits

Leaving but a trail of dripping blood over the land.

THIS WAS HER LAND, Juana's land, 17th century Mexico, Nueva España, where relentless passions merged with raw brutality to create a chaotic beauty. The peoples of Nueva España reflected this dichotomy in every sensual swing of their hips, in every syllable of prayer to la Virgen Maria.

Craaaack crak crakcrak. Juana heard the call of the blue heron before she saw it take off, its blue-grey wings melting into the summer clouds over Nueva España. She marveled at the mystery of flight, as though creatures of the sky were the rulers of the world, and we were but their invited guests.

She sometimes climbed Popocatepetl, reaching to the north, to la Ciudad de México, believing that if she reached far enough, she could touch the rooftops of this mystical city.

Across the grassland, alongside the marshes, the blistering Mexican sun embraced her slim aristocratic form. Juana knew this landscape well, having spent many youthful years exploring rocks and trees, devouring the books her grandfather, her Abuelo, lent her. Today she carried a treasure from Abuelo's biblioteca, a book that was now hers, a book by Plato only recently translated into Spanish, a handsome volume with pages hand sewn and bound in a stunning burgundy leather cover with silver imprinting.

She was intrigued by Plato's vision of the perfect state, but bristled at the notion of men owning women, for she wished to be "owned" by no one. He also wrote that "women and men have the same nature in respect to the guardianship of the state, save insofar as the one is weaker and the other is stronger." She smiled wryly, thinking how sad it was for men to be weaker.

She detoured to a hidden lagoon, a small swimming pool that captured cool water from a narrow waterfall that tumbled down the volcano, tossing to the winds the fragrance of the frangipani blooming by the pool's edge. Around a pile of volcanic rock and through a field of orange honeysuckle bushes, and there it was ... her private swimming pond.

She wrapped her book in her summer frock, covering it yet again with her cotton slip, set the package under an agave plant, and slipped naked into the refreshing pool.

"Oh!" Startled, she froze as a circle of blood formed around her, a drippy moat in mortal battle, with her body as the castle standing tall. She stood on tip toe to get a view of the whole episode. Her first. Fear suddenly struck, not from the blood, but fear from the jack rabbits racing to their holes and the erratic shadows plunging

down the mountainside to the water's edge. Men ... no, boys ... three young caballeros plummeted down the mountainside toward her, dizzy in their rush to prove their manhood.

"*¡Mira allí!*" sneered the tallest boy, his call setting blackbirds to flight. "*¡Una señorita bonita! ¡Esta sola!*" Two more boys appeared from behind the sycamore grove on the crest of the hill.

"*¡Vamos!*" challenged the tallest boy, a strapping teenager with ragged dark hair and a finely embroidered shirt. Their tumbling down the hill sliced through the afternoon's serenity with a flurry of birds and bugs and snakes escaping to hidden places.

The tallest boy began unbuckling his pants as he slid down the hill, reaching the edge of the pond as Juana spun and started toward the far side of the pool, hoping to escape. The last boy stumbled on the package protecting her book.

¡No! ¡No el libro! thought Juana. *Please not the book!*

"Look!" she challenged them. "Just try and get me!" She jumped straight up, her rounded breasts breaking through the water. She could handle losing her virginity, a quality she but little valued, but she would never forgive herself for losing a book so treasured by her Abuelo.

It worked. The boys focused their attention on her, forgetting that strange package. The tallest boy leapt into the water, heading for Juana, splashing with a commotion that sent fish and turtles hiding behind rocks.

"One kiss, little señorita," he oozed. "*Solo un beso.*"

Juana knew he wanted more than just one kiss. A scream froze in her throat, but it did not matter for there was no one to hear her.

She might have escaped; she was a decent swimmer, and a fast runner, but when she reached the middle of the pond she stopped. She could not leave. No... the burgundy bound book. The book was too important. She could not leave it to these childish ruffians to find.

A scratchy hand reached around her and grabbed her breast, so there, in the middle of the pool, she instinctively swirled, sweeping her arms in a big circle, catching up the surface blood and algae. Raising her arms to the sky, with blood oozing from her hair and from her fingertips to her armpits, dripping blood on the hand that had reached her breast, Juana screamed, a piercing wail.

"AAAAIIIIIIIIIAAAAAOOOOO!"

"*¡Dios mio! ¡Es un demonio,* a devil witch!" The boys froze, then spun in unison, and naked as desert stones they escaped over the hill toward a field far away. Only one boy dared to stop long enough to retrieve their clothes. None of them cared a whit about the strange package under the agave plant.