



Brother Bill's
Bait Bites Back
and Other Tales
from the Raton

RICARDO L GARCÍA

Brother Bill's Bait Bites Back

Brother Bill's Bait
Bites Back
AND
Other Tales from the Raton

RICARDO L GARCÍA

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN & LONDON

A shorter version of
“Feed Him Black Chickens”
was published previously in
La Herencia, volume 36
(Santa Fe: Gran Vía, 2002).
© 2004 by Ricardo L García
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States
of America



Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data

García, Ricardo L

Brother Bill's bait bites back and other
tales from the Raton / Ricardo L García.

p. cm.

“A Bison original”—P. [4] of cover.

ISBN 0-8032-7111-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Tales—New Mexico—Raton Region.

2. Raton Region (N.M.)—Social life and customs.

I. Title.

GRI10.N6G37 2004

398.2'09789'22—dc22

2003055558

This book is dedicated to
the men and women who told me tales
of the coal camps and ranches
of northeastern New Mexico.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

ix

Close Shave for Black Jack Ketchum

Black Jack Ketchum risked more than a nick when he threatened to kill Juan Rael over a haircut and shave.

I

In the Home of the Brave

An African American mother comforts
a Nazi soldier in her coal camp home.

13

Ol' Mama Lion

Miner Fred Owensby intended to install
an aerial on his car to catch radio waves
but caught a mountain lion instead.

21

Battle of the Brays

Yankee and Sugarite miners sprawl into
sweaty piles over the bray of a donkey.

31

Feed Him Black Chickens

Even the Lord can't tame
Fidel's young bride, Cimarron.

41

Mail-Order Baba

Through bad and good luck caused by squirrels,
Pete Durocavich finally finds his mail-order bride
(coauthored by Sharon K. García).

53

Contents

Making Do on Johnson Mesa

A rootin' tootin' cowboy and his wife put a pitch baby
to work to make ends meet on their small Johnson Mesa ranch.

65

Brother Bill's Bait Bites Back

Brother Bill's bait bites worse than it smells.

74

Don't Crowd Me, Mister

Two old CS cowboys commiserate on the concerns of
gnats, rattlesnakes, swallows, and such.

80

Mind Your Mothers

Gardiner Elementary School mothers trounce the
titans of high school football.

87

Un Cuento Viejo/An Old Story

To prevent a transfer to Hell to work for Lucifer,
an angel of the Lord must match wits with rowdy
viejos, tough guardian angels, and young lovers.

99

Ladies Ride Sidesaddle

When Arturo disobeys his mother, he pays the Devil
on the Kiowa prairie.

107

Foreword

If you're going to the Raton region, be sure to toughen up before you go. The men are rowdy and rough, and the women are tepid and tough. You'd better prepare and be loaded for bear, planting plenty of thistles in your hair, or they'll chew you up with cactus and spit you out, just for practice.

That's what we used to tell strangers to keep them away from the Raton region, mostly Colfax County and parts of Union in northeastern New Mexico. Actually, Raton folks are pretty much like others, hardworking, fun-loving, and honest, most of the time. They are plain people, but they are not ordinary.

Life is old there. Over the centuries, the region served as a confluence for people from sundry ethnic groups and most races, dating back at least eight thousand years to the Folsom people, who lived in the region after the last Ice Age. In the 1700s and 1800s, Kiowas and Comanches hunted and camped in the region, leaving place names such as Kiowa Mesa and Chicorica Creek. Their pottery shards and arrowheads are still found on the prairie, and beads traded from Spaniards are found on anthills.

The Spaniards explored the region in the late 1700s, leaving many place-names, including the region's name, Raton, Spanish for "rodent," so-named due to the large number of mice, bushy-tailed squirrels, and other rodents the Spaniards noticed in the region. (Locally, the name has been anglicized and is pronounced 'rah-TONE.') The Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail (1822–1880) bisected the region, and another, the Cimarron Cut-off, skirted the region southeasterly. Another Spanish place-name, Cimarrón, referred to

Foreword

the large Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep (*carnero cimarrón*) that inhabited the mountains. Nowadays the name refers to a canyon, a small river, and the town that served as Colfax County's seat for a short time. The town also served as the hub for the large Maxwell Land Grant and was a crossroads for Santa Fe Trail traders, Rocky Mountain trappers, Native Americans, soldiers, and ranchers.

During the first half of the twentieth century, ranching, dry-land farming, railroading, and coal mining flourished in the region, attracting people of all races and many ethnic groups from various parts of the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The railroads played an active part in colonization of the Raton region. The Santa Fe Railroad entered the region in 1878 and immediately developed mines in the region's coalfields. To mine the coal, immigrants from Greece, Italy, Wales, the Balkan countries, and Hispanics from New Mexico and Mexico were recruited. By the early 1900s, the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain, and Pacific Company and Phelps Dodge Corporation purchased most of the region's mining rights and established company towns (coal camps) that dotted the region's foothills. In 1888, the Colorado and Southern Railway finished a line from Denver, Colorado, to Fort Worth, Texas. The little town of Folsom was used by the railroad to recruit dry-land farmers and ranchers who wished to homestead, offering free fare on the railway for potential settlers, attracting people from Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and other parts south and east.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Colfax County was one of the most prosperous in New Mexico, a circumstance that further attracted African Americans and immigrants from Japan, the Philippines, Syria, and Lebanon. The Raton region is a rich mosaic of many influences. More than forty years ago, I was blessed with opportunities to hear tales of the Raton region the way stories have been told for centuries, old-timers talking. Born in the coal-mining camp of Swastika, raised in the Koehler coal camp and Raton, I listened to old-timers in the Koehler clubhouse and on front porches of their company-owned houses. In Raton, I

Foreword

listened in the City Taxi station, Hotel Yucca lobby, Di Lisio's Department Store, Paddock Café at La Mesa Park racetrack, and the sala at St. Joseph's Church on Martinez Street.

The tales in this book grew from the stories the old-timers told me. As orally transmitted folklore, they are living links in the chain of human experiences connecting us over time, place, and culture. For example, the Pitch Baby tale, "Making Do on Johnson Mesa," found among southwestern Native Americans, is much like the Uncle Remus Tar Baby tale and has been traced back to ancient China. It arrived in America via Africa. I owe a debt I can't repay to the old-timers. They didn't think of themselves as storytellers. They just talked and swore to the probity of what they said. Yet the people are real in the tales, although I may have some names and locations wrong. Having heard the tales a long time ago, my memory betrays me. I tried to be true to the spirit in which these tales were told about events that never made headline news and people who never had a building named after them.

Ricardo L García
Lincoln, Nebraska

Brother Bill's Bait Bites Back

Close Shave for Black Jack Ketchum

Dad took me to the Koehler clubhouse. He wanted a haircut and shave. Most times, Mom cut his hair, and he shaved himself. This Saturday, Dad indulged in the luxury of a barber's cut and shave, mostly to gossip with the barber, Mr. Juan Rael. I skimmed the photographs in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Look* magazines while I sat and listened. In the background, a baseball game murmured on the radio.

Mr. Rael made Dad comfortable in the barber's chair and wrapped a white cotton cape over him. "What it'll be, Manuel?"

"As always, shave and trim."

"No neck shave?"

"Thought that came with the whole shebang!"

"Hair on neck ain't your beard."

"Qué mirruña!—You're stingy!" Dad bantered. "Oughta be part of the shave."

"Qué va, man's gotta make a living. Are you trying to gyp me?"

"No, it's just—"

"Yeah, you are. Just 'cause I'm a mejicano."

"Yo tambien—Me, too," Dad injected. "Everybody bar-
ters, it's expected among mejicanos. Saw it in Juarez."

"Not in the high-class shops."

"Guess I never went to a high-class shop."

"You're in one now. Neck shave o' no?"

"Okay, but no charge for the after-shave lotion."

"Humph," Mr. Rael grumbled, conceding to free after-shave lotion.

"Juan, you been here a long time. What brought you to Koehler?"

"It has been a long, long time," Mr. Rael replied wearily. He was an angular, elderly man with a thick crop of wavy gray hair, heavy black eyebrows and mustache. "I came here 'cause I couldn't cut hair in a flood."

"Huh?"

"A terrible flood, August 27, 1908. Caused by a cloudburst west of Folsom, on the headwaters of the Dry Cimarron. Flash flood came at midnight with the fury of a tornado. Everybody sleeping. Telephone operator, Sarah J. Rooke, tried to call everybody, to warn about the flood. She was a real hero, saved lotta lives. After her calls, many ran to high ground, saving their lives. But she couldn't reach everybody before the floodwaters swept over the telephone office, taking her on a river ride to glory."

"Poor lady, you shouldn't make jokes about her."

"Oh, sit still, Manuel," Mr. Rael chided, "till I finish."

Mr. Rael reclined the barber's chair into the horizontal position and wrapped a warm towel over Dad's grisly whiskers. Totally focused, he lathered up a cup of soap and water, removed the towel, and daubed Dad's whiskers with sudsy lather. "Manuel, don't move. Don't talk, neither."

He sharpened the razor, stroking it back and forth over a leather strop hooked to the barber's chair. Dropping the strop, he flicked the razor's edge across his thumbnail, gripped the razor's handle between his thumb and fingers, and leaned over Dad's face. Carefully, gracefully, with agile, flowing strokes, he adeptly shaved Dad's grisly beard, plowing straight swaths through the lather . . . up his neck . . . underneath the chin . . . removing excess lather from the razor by lightly brushing the razor's edge across the palm of his left hand. When he finished the neck, he shaved up the right side of the face . . . the left.

He lay down the razor, placing another warm towel around Dad's face, and rubbed Dad's face and neck clean.

"So? Whatcha think?" Mr. Rael stepped back, after patting a good-smelling after-shave lotion over the shaved area.

“As always, perfect.” Dad smiled, rubbing his chin, pleased with Mr. Rael’s light touch.

Mr. Rael raised the chair’s back and began clipping Dad’s hair. He had been silent and totally focused during the shave. Now, with comb and clippers in hand, he could continue the flood story: “This is the truth, nothing but the truth. We had a bad flood in Folsom—un creciente tremendo, a flash flood. It came down the Dry Cimarron and wiped out the town, no joking. Sarah Rooke was a hero. She saved many lives. We felt sad for her, ’cause she never made it. She was too busy warning everybody about the flood. Almost all the buildings were ruined. Many people drowned. I was lucky. I coulda drowned, too. My shop was flooded, wrecked.”

“Didn’t you live in the hotel, above the shop?”

“Sí, sí, but I was in Raton during the flood. Me and my novia, we were on our honeymoon.”

“On your honeymoon? Haah, que suerte!”

“You said it, I’m a lucky man, in many ways. After that, I came to Koehler. Got this job. Still have it. Always will, I hope, ’cause I don’t have no pension, no Social Security. But, I’m okay. Got enough money to bury me when I die.”

“Cuánto años que—How many years since—” Dad started to ask.

“O-oh, Manuel, I been a barber a long time. As a chamaco, a mere boy, I was tall and cut hair in my Papa’s shop in the barrio in Fort Worth. He taught me to cut.” Mr. Rael flicked trimming from the cape and turned down the volume on the radio. The ball game had ended. “Didn’t always live here in Koehler. I come to Folsom first from Fort Worth. I was just a young man, looking to make something of myself. In Fort Worth, I read this in the paper.”

Mr. Rael set down the clippers and comb, reached in his back pocket, removed a wallet stuffed with an assortment of crumpled papers and cards. He fingered through the pudgy wallet until he found a creased, yellowed newspaper clipping. He read. “A U.S. Land Office has been established at Folsom to accommodate the tide of emigration pouring in on the line of the Great Pan Handle Route, 8,500,000 acres

of land for the taking and improving. Free transportation on the Colorado, Fort Worth and Southern Texas Railroad.” He folded the clipping and returned it to his wallet.

“You know, there were posters saying this plastered all over Fort Worth. The railroad wanted farmers, and ranchers, to use the railroad to haul their grain and cows. I keep the ad to remind me why I came here in the first place. Looked like a good place to make something of myself. Turned out I was right, but there’s been some bumps in the road.” He picked up the scissors and started clipping Dad’s hair, continuing the tale in a braggadocio tone. “I rode free of charge on the train in 1898. Said I was going to improve some land, but I lied. I didn’t know nothin’ about farming. That’s no crime. Folsom needed a barber. I set up the barbershop in the Folsom Hotel. The hotel paid for everything. They wanted to be fancy. Later, I bought the barbershop.”

“So you been doing this a long time, qué no?”

“I almost quit, once.”

“Porque?”

“To go to Heaven, or Hell!”

“Chale!—No! Stop with the wisecracks!”

“De veras, really, don’t you remember Black Jack Ketchum?”

“El bandito! I never knew him, but I sure heard of him.”

“La gente here in these parts thought he was just a plain train robber. In Texas, he was known to be a killer. He liked to kill Mexicans.”

“Qué malo!”

“Not too good a man, I tell you. He killed my primo hermano, in San Angelo, just to take his sombrero. He didn’t go to jail, or nothin’. He didn’t even pay for the funeral. The familia had to pay for it. I mean his brothers and sisters had to pitch in to pay for the funeral. He had many children. They were small. The mother give them to the uncles and aunts to raise.”

“That is bad business, and—”

“Üh, that’s nothing,” Mr. Rael interrupted Dad. “Another time near El Paso, just after he bought a new Winchester

rifle, Black Jack made a bet with his brother. He bragged to Sam: 'I kin hit 'most anythin' with this rifle.'

" 'Bet you cain't hit that Mexican herder, whilst he's ridin' away.'

" 'Easy as pie. Bet ya ten dollars, the greazer will pitch to the left side of th' saddle.'

" 'Yer on, brother.'

"Blam! He shot the *pobre* with his Winchester rifle. The *pobre* fell to the left side of the saddle. Sam paid his brother ten dollars."

"How did you come to know this about Black Jack?"

"Fort Worth paper. A barber has plenty of time to read the papers."

"Didn't they have a trial?"

"Manuel, in those days, a Mexican's life no vale nada, I tell ya, a Mexican's life didn't mean nothin' in Texas."

"Un lugar muy bruto—a brutish place," Dad muttered, thoroughly disgusted.

"It's better here, nowadays. The Anglos didn't know he was a killer, but they didn't like Black Jack anyway. He and his gang held up the Colorado and Southern Railroad twice, right outside Folsom. The holdups were near the same location, right after Horseshoe Curve, between Folsom and Des Moines. An old wagon road crossed the Colorado and Southern Railroad track there, and just beyond the curve the track was level and straight, a good place to stop and rob a train.

"When the southbound train stopped at Folsom, Black Jack and his gang snuck up on the train, in that narrow place, between the tender and the express car. Then, when the train slowed down for Horseshoe Curve, Black Jack popped out with a gun, just appeared standin' in the fire glow of the engine's boiler. He ordered the engineer to stop the train and uncouple the express and mail cars. This was so he could take them cars up the road a ways and loot them, leavin' the other cars sitting on the tracks.

"The conductor told the passengers to get down in the aisles of the coaches, just in case stray bullets came flyin'.

Everybody was scared. They did as told. The gang took the mail and express car about half a mile down-track and looted it. They didn't get much that first time. But, the second robbery, they stole \$20,000 in gold and \$10,000 in silver. That time they even took Mrs. Owen's silk wedding dress. The gang used that fine silk dress as a sack to make their haul."

"Who was Mrs. Owen? Why her dress?"

"Meanness, that's all it was, plain meanness. She was a local girl, Celeste Moen. She was about to marry Sheriff Owen. She got married without it, in a nice dress her mother gave her. You gotta hand it to Black Jack. When it come to robbin' and killin', he was brutal. He had a lotta guts and no conscience. That's to be respected."

"I thought you didn't like him?"

"I'm telling you, I didn't say I liked him. I said you gotta respect a man like Black Jack, like you respect a rattlesnake. Keep your distance."

"Guess there's more'n one kind of respect."

"Dunno about that, but there's more'n one reason to show respect. Black Jack got too close for comfort, let me tell you. One time after some of the robberies, Black Jack came into my shop. The gang was camped out in a cave in Dry Canyon. It wasn't much of a place, no water or electricity. You see, they wouldn't sleep in the hotel, 'cause someone might shoot them in their sleep."

"Crooks never sleep in peace."

"You betcha. They'd come in town to take a bath, eat, get a haircut. One day Black Jack, the bandito himself, walks right into my shop. 'Course, I recognized him from the 'Wanted' posters. He was a tall man, thick black hair and a thick moustache around his upper and lower lips. No one could miss that strange bushy moustache."

"Do you mean he had a beard?"

"No, Manuel, he had a moustache around his bottom lip. All these years as a barber, I ain't never seen nuthin' like it, like he had a black, furry tire tube tied around his lips. But, I tell you, his chin was clean-shaved, I tell you."

“Que cosa rara!—What a strange thing!” Dad muttered. Like me, Dad couldn’t picture such a strange image of a man with a mustache around his lower lip. I couldn’t wait for Mr. Rael to continue.

“I tell you, you couldn’t miss him. He was a cocky man. He never wore a mask when he robbed.”

“Wouldn’t someone catch him for the reward?”

“Paah, reward! What good’s a reward when you’re dead? We were afraid of him. He was a bad hombre, un diablo bien hecho. He was the Devil himself.”

“When he came in the shop, he asked: ‘He-e-y, Greazer, know me?’

“‘Sí, Mr. Ketchum.’ I pretended to be a *pochó*, maybe he would leave me alone, I thought, not worth killing, if I pretended to be a *pochó*.

“‘Folks don’t call me Black Jack fer nuthin’!’

“‘Sí, Mr. Ketchum.’

“‘I’d soon kill a greazer than gab with one.’

“‘Sí, Mr. Ketchum.’

“‘Need a shave and haircut. Reckon yer hands’er steady, are they?’

“Let me tell you, I was afraid but pretended to be okay. I held my breath . . . stuck out my hands . . . for him to see. He looks at my hands; they were shaking un *poquito*, and my toes were squirming in my boots. Ole Black Jack was happy that I was properly scared but still had a little control. I was careful when I wrapped the cape around his neck, padding it with some tissue paper, pinning it with much care.

“‘Well, Greazer, ya do a good job, I’ll pay ya plenty! No stinkin’ beans, neither!’

“He laughed real loud. I laughed, too.

“‘See this gun? It’s a Colt 45. Perfect fer killing a greazer. That’s what’ll happen. I’m gonna let you give me a shave and a haircut. Mind ya! Better have a steady hand. One little nick. One little dint from yer razor, and blam! You’re the deadest greazer in this here barbershop.’ ”

“Wow! Were you scared?” I was completely engrossed in the story, enthralled by Mr. Rael’s courage.

Mr. Rael scowled and crow's feet wrinkled his temples. "I was afraid for my life!" Mr. Rael shook his head, eyes trailing to the floor. "What could I do? He liked to kill mejicanos. I cut his hair. When I finished, I turned him around so he faced the big mirror. I held a small mirror so he could see the back of his head. He looked in the mirror a long time, then he said: 'Looks a tad too short.'

"Hijo, mano! I was scared!

" 'Hell, don't worry. It'll grow back,' he said. Then he laughed real loud.

"Lady Luck was smiling at me. I could feel her. I felt better . . . I removed the cape to shake the hair off. I pinned it back on. Then, I lowered him down and put a warm towel over his beard, to soften the bristle. I mixed the lather, really soaped it up. He had a hand on his gun, ready to shoot if I nicked him. As I stropped the razor, I winked at Lady Luck. She looked good in the big mirror behind us. I knew that if I nicked Black Jack, right away, I must cut his throat. Before he could shoot me. I couldn't forget he might kill me. Lady Luck winked back."

"Lady Luck with you today," Dad jested. "Not a nick on my face."

"Haah! Lady Luck was with you!" Mr. Rael chortled, then continued, "Even when Lady Luck was on my side, I didn't take chances. So I shaved Ketchum real slo-o-o-w . . . ver-ry careful . . . con mucho cuidado—with much caution." He continued, "Shavin' his chin was tricky, but God blessed me with a steady hand. Soon I finished, no nicks. I toweled off his face and removed the cape. He got up from the chair and stood in front of the mirror, rubbing his chin and neck. I didn't say nothin'. Just waited for him to say something.

" 'Purdy durn good, fer a greazer.'

" 'Sí, Mr. Ketchum.'

" 'Tell me, was ya the least bit scairt?'

" 'Sí, Mr. Ketchum.'

" 'Haah! Here!' He threw a twenty-dollar gold piece. I caught it.

" 'Don't spend it all for wine, hear?'

“He went from the shop. I was a happy mejicano, happy to be alive. And, to get paid so well.”

“Did he come anymore?”

“Just one more time. Same thing! Scared me, but he paid good.”

“Ah, you’re just bragging!” Dad dismissed the whole story. “Just like your fishing stories.”

“Fishing stories, nothing! This is the truth. Here, I’ll show you something. Don’t tell nobody.” Mr. Rael held a finger to his puckered lips and winked as he punched in the cash register’s No Sale key, fumbling beneath the coin tray. He grabbed two twenty-dollar gold pieces and handed one to Dad and one to me. The face of the mellow gold coin showed Lady Liberty holding an olive branch and a torch. She stood stately, poised with one foot on a ledge, looking forward resolutely.

Fingering the coin, Dad stared at its luminescence. This was a solid piece of gold worth twenty dollars in 1901. Now, in 1944, it was worth much more. He nodded, turned the coin over and over in his hand, weaving it through his fingers. He flipped the coin in the air, caught it, and flopped it on his wrist, “Heads! . . . Heads it is.”

Then he balled my fingers over the gold coin in my hand. “Close your eyes, *hito*.” Grasping my hand, he coached me to massage the coin. “Feel the surface with your fingertips, like silk, *qué no*?”

I closed my eyes as Dad directed, rubbing my fingertips across the surface of the gold coin and tracing the smoothly etched silhouette of Lady Liberty. Without looking, I could feel every detail of her velvety, flowing gown and the crown of spires on her head. It was just as Dad said, smooth like silk. Although I had never touched silk, nothing could be smoother, I thought.

“I coulda been killed,” Mr. Rael bragged, “but I got the coins, I’m here. Black Jack’s dead. I earned those coins fair and square. Gave him a haircut and shave, and no nicks.”

“How come you keep them here in the shop?” We handed the coins back to Mr. Rael.

“Good luck. They bring me good luck. They go where I go.”

“Even fishin’?”

“You bet, especially fishin’.”

“What’re they worth?”

“Dunno exactly, more’n twenty dollars each, I tell you.”

He tucked the two coins back into the cash register under the coin tray.

“Aren’t you afraid of robbers?”

Dad read my mind. I had the same thought.

“What if a bad egg hears about it?”

“Who’s gonna tell? It’s our secret, qué no?”

“We’ll keep our mouths shut.” Dad turned to me. “We won’t tell anybody, even your mother.”

“Ye-yes!” I stammered, flattered to be trusted with a secret among grown men.

“Did Black Jack get his comeuppance?”

“Let me tell you, Manuel. He got swift justice, a speedy trial, too. He robbed again, got caught, had a trial, and then the sheriff hanged him.”

“That’s all you remember?”

“There’s more. Back in 1901, he robbed a train by himself. He was wounded and captured. They held a trial and sentenced him to hang in Clayton. That was somethin’, quickest trial in Union County. Didn’t take long for the jury to decide. Just before the hanging, his arms were tied behind his back. He said, ‘Don’t wanna death-mask over my face.’ When the hangman put the noose over his head and around his neck, Black Jack sneered at everybody watching. It was a big crowd, bigger ’an the one when Teddy Roosevelt visited Raton.”

“Naw.”

“Yah! ’Course Teddy Roosevelt wasn’t president yet. He was lookin’ for Rough Riders to go to Cuba to fight. I tell ya, it was easier to get a crowd for a hanging than to go to war.”

“You’re full of stuffing, like a Christmas turkey.”

“Thanks, Manuel. Anyways, the hangman put the rope around Ketchum’s neck, tight-like so it wouldn’t slip off

his neck. When the gallows' trapdoor opened, Ketchum fell hard. His tongue stuck outta his mouth; his eyes rolled; he kicked his legs, jerkin' and gaggin' a lot. Suddenly, his body slumped to the ground below, and his head spun off his shoulders and went flying, wobbling like a football, with his tongue flopping out. The head plopped onto the deck of the gallows and bounced, and then rolled onto the ground at everybody's feet in front of the platform.

"Women screamed and pulled their dresses away. Everybody stepped back. It was ugly as sin. The headlines in the papers said, 'Black Jack Ketchum Decapitated on Gallows.' Later, people complained. He didn't die like he was supposed to." Mr. Rael grinned sardonically, relishing each gory detail. He winked at me. "People wanted him to die right away . . . like other banditos . . . without losing his head."

"Ho! Good joke!"

"No joke. His head might as well be a football, I tell you. It wobbled as it went flying in the air, just like when you throw a football. Anyways, I volunteered to shave Ketchum before the hanging, for free. The sheriff was a good man and took me up on the offer. Just before Ketchum was to hang, I rode over to Clayton with my shaving gear. When I got there, the sheriff had second thoughts. He didn't like Ketchum much. Remember the silk wedding dress? The one Ketchum tore to make a bag to steal the gold? It belonged to the sheriff's bride. He didn't care too much for Ketchum and trusted a rattlesnake more. Sheriff was worried for my life, so he sent two deputies to go into the cell with me. Sheriff told me: 'They'll hold their guns to his head. Any trouble from Black Jack, they'll blow his brains out.'

"I walked to the cell with the two deputies, but before they can open the door, Black Jack looked at me and growled to the deputies: 'Hell, you send me a greazer! I'm not letting no greazer shave my face.' It was a pity, but he didn't want me to shave him."

"Eh, how's this? You pity the man after all he did, killing your primo hermano, leaving all his children without a father, and that other pobre mejicano, and robbing the train?"

Mr. Rael paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Up to this time, he had spoken boastfully and off the cuff without giving much thought to what he said. Now he spoke slowly and deliberately, weighing each word carefully, his voice subdued and hushed as though in solemn prayer:

“After the hanging, the sheriff heaped Black Jack’s body in a pine box. He grabbed Black Jack’s hairy head and threw it in with the body, and nailed down the lid. . . . I got to thinking, after he was buried, it was a pity for them poor maggots and worms . . . They would come lookin’ for his body. . . . I felt sorry for them. Bad enough, they had to eat the face of the Devil. . . . His face wasn’t clean-shaved and was badly nicked.”

In the Home of the Brave

They sauntered down the railroad tracks to their family cemetery at the east side of Koehler. The Santa Fe tracks bisected the coal camp and ran west up Prairie Crow Canyon to the mine entry and tipple. Homes lined both sides of the tracks in square grids up against the hills. The company-owned houses were pretty much the same, brown cinder brick frames with pitched roofs. Each had a kitchen, small living room, and two bedrooms. Most houses had crawl spaces beneath; a few had cellars, excavated by Italian and Slavic occupants for making and storing wine. The houses of the mine superintendent and company doctor were plumbed with indoor hot and cold running water, a kitchen sink, and a bathroom complete with porcelain tubs and flushing toilets. All houses were wired for electricity and Montgomery Ward refrigerators were luxuries in a few kitchens. Most backyards contained outhouses, coal sheds, water pumps, chicken coops, and vegetable gardens in the summer.

“Mama, why are we going to the cemetery? It’s not Memorial Day.”

“It’s a nice day to clear the weeds from the graves.”

“Matías and his family, they don’t have to clear weeds every year, and they got three babies buried in a Raton cemetery.”

“Well, our folks aren’t buried there.”

“Why not?”

“Honey, we just do it ourselves, clear the graves of our folks. Grass and weeds grow tall every summer. Winter kills them, and we wait till spring to pick ’em when they’re good and dry, easy picking. Most times, we do it together with

your Uncle Bill, the Walkers, and the Johnsons. We do it all in one day. But I caught a bad bug this spring, not a serious one, mind you, a bad case of cabin fever. Weather's been so nice, I fancied to clear Mama and Papa's graves today."

In the World War I heyday of the coke ovens, when they were fully stoked for producing coke for smelters in Arizona and Colorado, as many as ten African American families lived in Koehler. Brought from West Virginia to work the coke ovens, they were not deliberately segregated, though there was a tendency for families of like ethnic groups to live near each other; African Americans did the same. In Koehler, however, the whole coal camp was like a village commons. African Americans frequented the company store, the clubhouse, and school like everybody else.

But in death, African Americans were segregated. They were not buried in Raton cemeteries as were other coal-camp folks. In 1918 they first used an open pasture east of the coke ovens to bury their dead. That year the influenza epidemic tripled the number of coal-camp deaths, just as it did in the rest of the country.

Mrs. Dahlia Heard wasn't sure how to explain the segregated cemetery to her six-year-old daughter.

"Honey, we couldn't afford to bury Papa and Mama in one of the Raton cemeteries."

"How come Matías's Papa could?"

"I don't know."

Mrs. Heard wasn't hiding the truth from Marian. She didn't know why they couldn't afford to bury their dead in the Raton cemeteries back in 1917 and 1922 when her parents died. Perhaps then, African Americans weren't paid the same as other miners and coke-oven workers? Now in 1944, the miners were paid on a union scale, regardless of race. Or perhaps the Raton cemeteries raised the cost of burial for African Americans, making it difficult for them to pay? Or perhaps they preferred the convenience of a local cemetery? Whatever the reason, African Americans created their own cemetery on company property. Nobody seemed to mind.

At the graves, Mrs. Heard and Marian set down the wash-tub, hoe, and shovel they'd brought to clear out the weeds. Inside the washtub, they carried a gallon jug of drinking water.

"It's such a nice day. If we were going anywhere else, we'd packed a picnic lunch."

"Wish we did."

"We won't be here that long. Set the water in them high weeds over yonder, out of the sun, keep it cool. Make lots of noise so's to scare off snakes."

"Snakes?"

"O-ooh, they won't hurt you, 'less you step on one. Make plenty of noise. Here!" Mrs. Heard yanked a sturdy weed from one of the graves. "Use this to poke ahead of you."

Marian scrambled toward the tall weeds with the water jug, brushing the weed stalk ahead of her path while loudly singing her favorite song, "Home on the Range."

"O-OH, give me a HOME." She yelped out the words, making sure she could be heard by all of the creepy, crawly critters.

"Yipes!" Marian dropped the water jug along with the sturdy weed and dashed back to her mother.

"Did you see a snake?"

"No-o."

"Why you hidin' behind my dress?"

"There's somethin' in the tall weeds."

"If it wasn't a snake, or a mountain lion, I reckon we're okay."

"Wasn't a snake, or mountain lion."

"Was it a fairy-tale giant?"

"No, Mama. It's not a fairy-tale giant. Look a' the water jug."

"Where? I can't see it."

"That's 'cause it's gone."

"Land sakes, somebody took it."

"That man did, Mama, I betcha."

"What man?"

"The one crouching in the weeds."

“Yo-o-u-h-o-o!” Feigning bravery for her daughter, Mrs. Heard yelled in the direction of the tall weeds.

No answer.

“Yo-o-u-h-o-o!”

Still no answer.

Mrs. Heard cautiously edged toward the tall weeds with Marian hiding behind her dress. The water jug was empty and standing in place where Marian had dropped it.

“If all’s you want is the water, you kin have it.” Instantly, flecks of impressions flickered. “Nothing to fear,” she told herself, half-believing. “Oh, dear, he mustn’t see my hands trembling.” She clenched her hands into loose fists and hoped the man was friendly. “Now, stop tryin’ to scare us to death and come on out.”

Slowly, a young man dressed in a German army uniform rose above the tall, dry weeds, raising his hands and arms as though surrendering.

Again flecks of impressions flickered through Mrs. Heard’s mind. “He’s not a man, but a boy.” Mrs. Heard remembered hearing about some German war prisoners who had escaped from the prison near Trinidad. A warning was issued in the Raton Range about an escape from the prison where German intelligence officers and their staff were incarcerated. Weather permitting, the prisoners were put to work helping farmers and working for the highway department. Earlier this spring, ten prisoners were cleaning along the highway. At noon while the prisoners were eating, one of the guards fell asleep, and the prisoners made a run for it. Eight were easily apprehended. Two more were on the loose. This one must have hidden on a coal train that brought him to Koehler, where it was parked in a siding.

Transfixed, they stared at each other . . . Nobody moved . . . Emboldened by the soldier’s youth, Mrs. Heard felt in control and waved for him to lower his arm. Timidly, he lowered one arm, then the other.

“Ma-ma, I’m scared.” Marian clutched her mother’s dress.

"Why, he's just a boy, Marian. Like our Eddy. Only Eddy's in France, fighting boys just like this one."

"Is he a German soldier?"

"Yes. He probably escaped from the Trinidad prison." She turned to the soldier:

"Have you a name?"

"Johannes Kaufmann, 393093404." He seemed to understand the question and answered like a prisoner of war, telling just his name and serial number.

"Look at his eyes, Marian. He's just a boy, a frightened one, at that," Mrs. Heard reassured herself.

Marian glowered at the young soldier, darted from behind her mother, and chastised, "You drank all our water!"

Startled by Marian's sudden spunky move, he stepped back.

"Marian, be nice. He doesn't understand a lick you're saying."

"How come?"

"'Cause he's from Germany, honey." Mrs. Heard turned to the soldier and raised her voice a few decibels, "We're clearing the graves." She pointed to the hand-carved headstones that marked the graves.

"Yah! Yah!" He shook his head up and down.

"Well? Come on now."

He followed them back to the graves. Mrs. Heard was pleased to see the boy knew exactly what to do without instructions. "He's roused his share of weeds," Mrs. Heard muttered gaily through the side of her mouth to Marian, who grinned broadly, also pleased to see the boy pulling weeds and tossing them in the tub.

They picked quietly and quickly. When done, Mrs. Heard and Marian struggled to lift the tub filled with weeds. Johannes brushed them away, grabbed the tub by both handles and lifted it. Tipping his head aside, he motioned toward the empty water jug. Marian fetched the jug and placed it atop the weeds. He nodded for them to walk ahead and lead the way. Each picked up a tool, walked toward the tracks, and started home. Walking behind, he carried the tub full of

weeds, whistling a tune Mrs. Heard didn't recognize. When Mrs. Heard and Marian entered their yard, he stopped at the gate and set down the weeds.

"Are you hungry?" Mrs. Heard lifted her hand as though spooning food into her mouth.

"Yah! Yah!" Emphatically, he nodded his head up and down and mimicked Mrs. Heard, spooning with his hand as though eating.

"Well, then, empty them weeds and come on in." Mrs. Heard pointed to an empty oil barrel. "Marian, now be nice an' take the young man over to the trash barrel. Soon's he's done, bring him in the house. I'm going in."

"Mama, I'm scared." While they had pulled weeds at the graves, everything seemed fine. Now at the house, Marian wasn't so sure.

"Nothing to be afraid of." Mrs. Heard chided, and then softened her tone. "Snakes in the weeds are more worrisome." She gently ruffled Marian's curly locks and turned to enter the house.

Marian led the young soldier by the shirtsleeve to the barrel on the opposite side of the back fence. He hefted the weeds into the barrel, sauntered back to the front gate, and set the tub down. Marian boldly opened the gate and said, "Come on." She took his sweaty hand and led him around to the back porch and showed him where to hang the tub on the railing. They rinsed their hands at the pump.

Marian led him around to the front of the house. Normally, the Heards encouraged folks to use the back door, which opened directly into the kitchen. The front door, used mostly by company, was too formal for friends and neighbors. Marian led the young soldier onto the front porch and into the living room. As soon as they entered, he dropped her hand to remove his cap.

"Come, and sit," Mrs. Heard called from the kitchen.

"Sit," Marian pointed to one of chairs at the kitchen table. Like an obedient puppy, he sat down and put his cap in his back pocket.

"Here's some more water," Mrs. Heard said, scooping a dipper full of water. He gulped it down. She went to the basin and brought the whole bucket of water. He ladled dipper after dipper of cool water until he emptied the bucket.

Mrs. Heard brought him dry bread she was saving for pudding. He ate the stale dry bread with relish, gnawing with gusto even though it was hard to chew.

"My, my. Appears you haven't eaten in a week. And that bread's barely fit for puddin', but chew it well, hear?"

Mrs. Heard took a bowl from the cupboard and ladled some beans from the pot simmering on the stove. "I was fixing some red beans for dinner. Hope you like 'em. They're not quite done."

He gobbled the beans and politely handed Mrs. Heard the empty bowl. He made the sign of the cross, bowed his head and prayed, clasping his hands.

"My land, he's Catholic." Mrs. Heard spoke aloud in a reverential lisp that was like praying in church. "I do believe you're reciting the Lord's Prayer. I can't say for sure, don't understand a word you're saying. I do believe you're Catholic . . . I feel so guilty. Here I gave you stale bread and red beans, and here you are in the kitchen giving thanks to our Lord for deliverance. . . . And you don't know a word I'm saying." She turned to Marian. "Bring the boy some milk."

Marian was pleased to play a part. She scurried to find a cup for the milk. When Johannes saw Marian returning with the milk, a warm smile rippled across his face. He nodded his head. "Danke! Danke!" In three huge swallows, he gulped the milk and handed the empty cup back to Marian.

"Boy-o-boy," Marian exclaimed, "he guzzled that milk in no time flat!"

"Marian, don't use slang," Mrs. Heard corrected her. "It's said, 'He drank the milk quickly.' "

"Do you think you should call the sheriff? He's a German soldier, escaped from Trinidad."

"He's hardly a boy, much less an escaped soldier. He's just like our Eddy."

"He don't look like Eddy."

“My, my, you’re speaking poorly. It’s ‘He doesn’t look like Eddy.’ Of course, he doesn’t, he’s German and Catholic.”

“Nu-uh, he’s one of them Nazees Papa says Eddy’s fightin’ in France.”

“Oh, fuf! He’s not a Nazi. He’s Christian, just like you and me and Papa.”

Johannes hadn’t understood a word. After gulping the milk, he stood abruptly to leave. Briskly, he stepped toward Mrs. Heard, startling her. She hedged backwards. He waved his hand for her to stop backing away, lightly touched her forehead with his right hand, and then retracted it. Gazing lovingly into her eyes, he crossed himself, eyes brimming with tears.

He crossed himself again and extended his hand as if to shake. Mrs. Heard offered her hand. Johannes clasped it with both of his and then reluctantly released his grip, dropping her hand. He scooted through the living room and front door onto the porch, slipped on his cap, and walked to the tracks.

Ol' Mama Lion

Fred etched the coal seam. Beyond the area where he worked, the coal room was pitch black and the sharp scratching of his pick was muffled by the stifling darkness. Five feet above the etchings, he bored six holes at an upward slant. Setting the auger away from the dig, he prepared a dummy cartridge by wrapping a sheet of paper around his pick handle, sealed it with saliva, slipped it from the pick handle and filled the cartridge with dynamite powder.

He made six cartridges, inserted them in the holes, and gently tamped them in place. Inserting a long copper needle into the shots, he stemmed the holes with dirt and then carefully withdrew the needles, threading a fuse into the needle holes. He entwined the fuses into a long single string that stretched to the entry of the room where he was digging. Crouching behind a coal car, he touched the end of the fuse to the hot glass of the lamp hooked onto his hard leather cap.

"Fire in the hole!" Fred counted off seconds, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-Wumpff!

The blast spewed dust as thick and black as tar and shattered the neatly etched coal into irregular chunks that crumpled to the ground, imploding under their own weight. Fred slogged a cud of tobacco around his gums and clamped his lips tightly, breathing through his nose as he reentered the room.

He ignored the thick powdery dust coating his face and clothing and shoveled the newly blasted coal in carefully layered chunks, larger chunks in the bottom of the coal car and smaller chunks wedged between them. The middle-

size chunks went next and the smallest chunks topped off the load. Shoveling coal by hand was hard work, but when carefully loaded, a well-chunked-up coal car could carry up to three tons of coal.

While he hurriedly loaded the car, a team of mules pulled a two-car train of coal alongside Fred's car. The driver stopped the mules, disembarked, and assisted Fred, coupling his car to the end of the train. Fred tossed his pick, shovel, auger, and lunch pail on the rear car of the three-car train, scurried to the head car, and mounted, barking to the mule driver, "Let's go, Gil. I'm done."

"Where's the fire?"

"Gotta get home. Get this creeper crawling!"

Gil shrugged, clicked his tongue, and shook the reins. The train lurched into a slow crawl as the mules strained, slowly lugging the coal cars.

"Can't they go no faster?"

"Times."

"When?"

"When they feel like it."

"When's that?"

"Ever' now and then."

"Make 'em feel your sprag!"

"Won't do no good. Got two speeds, in and out the mine. 'Course if'n we walked, they'd go faster." They hopped from the head car and walked beside the mules, leading them by the bridle. "What's the rush, anywho?"

"Brother-in-law ordered a radio, from Monkey Wards. Gonna mount it in the Flint."

"You don't say, one of them fancy radios in the car." He grinned skeptically.

"Not too fancy, but it'll be easy to install. It's portable, battery operated. Just tie it down to the back seat."

"Shoot! That won't take long."

"That's only the half of it. Gotta rig up an aerial to catch the radio waves. Sorta like fishing, you catch the radio waves with an aerial, like a net."

"How's that?"

"Jay's gonna help. We're gonna weld pipes in the shape of a cross to the back bumper, then string wires to the windshield from the crossbars."

"Need special wire?"

"Naw, gonna use some of Frieda's clothesline."

"Whatta she use, the Flint? Your car'll look like a clothesline rambling down the road."

"Won't allow Frieda to use it for hangin' longjohns."

"Still, you're gonna be a regular lightning rod."

"Don't plan to drive in thunderstorms."

"Bet you'll burn up a lotta batteries."

"Yeah, probably."

"And blow a fuse."

"Nope, no fuses."

"Mark my word, somethin' will go wrong."

Fred sensed Gil's envy but wasn't in the mood to placate it. "You been skinning mules too long."

"Yeah, probably."

"Why, I'll be able to drive the Flint atop Goat Hill and pick up radio stations far away as Kansas and Oklahoma."

"Yeah, probably."

"Bet you won't be too proud to set in the Flint to hear a ball game."

"And a boxing match, too."

"Can't be too proud, or you won't hear any of it."

Fred jerked the lead mule's bridle. It balked and stopped dead in its tracks. The other mules conspired, digging in their heels.

"Stubborn, hard-headed jackasses!" The more Gil scolded the mules, the more they dug in their heels. Gil turned to Fred. "Cain't make 'em go, till they're ready."

"Jees! Be faster on a slow boat to China. I'm outta here! Lemme get my tools."

Gil nodded patiently, carping while Fred bristled away from the balky mules. "Suit yourself. Don't gripe, if'n the weighman scotches you!"

"Hey, fair's fair. Got three ton in my car. You watch Barnes weigh it and give him my check tab."

Fred jaunted briskly toward the main entry. As soon as he stepped out the main entry, he turned in his pick, shovel, auger, and lamp without waiting to check the tonnage of his dig. Outside the mine, he basked in the glaring contrast of the sun flowing over his shoulders. Squinting his eyes, he strained to see in the brightness of the day. It was one of those clear summer days when the sandstone rimrocks atop the canyon walls appeared to be nearby. Glad to be out-of-doors, he strode home on the railroad tracks in the bright, clear sunlight. Summer was at its peak with days starting early and cool and lingering late into the night. There would be plenty of light to install the radio and aerial.

He hurried until he reached Montenegro Hill, where he left the railway and slowed his paced walking up the hill toward his house. Just before entering the yard, Fred spat out the chewing tobacco. The tar spittle splattered on the tassels of canyon grass that cluttered the fence. At the back porch, he dusted off his overalls, kicked the dust from his steel-toed work boots, and laid his hard cap on the railing.

Drawing water at the well pump, he placed the bucket on the steps. He went inside and told Freida the plans for the evening. Grabbing a towel and soap, he returned to the porch. The cold, clean well water felt good as he splashed it over his face, wiped the coal dust from his face, neck, and hands, and pitched the coal-black water into the garden. Brusquely, he rubbed himself dry and hung the black smudged towel on the railing. To save time, he didn't change clothing but stayed in his cotton shirt, overalls, and steel-toed boots. He didn't bother to remove the wide leather belt he wore workdays to hook a battery casing for his headlamp. Actually, he rather enjoyed the snug, comfortable support the belt provided around his growing girth. He scrunched his hard cap onto his head and bit off a fresh chunk of chewing tobacco.

He proudly eyed the car he kept parked by the front gate. It was a closed-body, four-door 1924 Flint with a six-cylinder Continental motor, skinny balloon tires, and celluloid windows that could be attached in cold weather. He walked

around the Flint, inspecting tires and rubbing off the mud caked onto the wooden spokes of the left rear wheels. He cranked the engine.

Ker-poppa! Ker-poppa! The motor gagged and coughed, sporadically hitting on four and then six cylinders. Fred shifted into first gear. The car tottered down the path of Montenegro Hill and wobbled onto Van Houten's main road. The Flint and Fred were on the way to Koehler.

The road from Van Houten south to Koehler skirted the sandy rimrock foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range, following a trail once used by ranchers to drive cattle. Unpaved, deeply rutted in places, and rippled in washboards in other spots, the road was dusty and dangerous with jagged rocks and rutted gulches that could break an axle or puncture a tire. Fred held the speed at fifteen miles per hour, even though the Flint could do sixty, top speed.

Now on the road heading toward Koehler, Fred felt better. Puffs of dust rolled behind the Flint and trailed away. He relaxed in the driver's seat and enjoyed the view when he wasn't negotiating the car between ruts and rocks. Along the shoulder of the road, the skunk cabbages, deer brush, and scrub oaks were in full bloom. To the east, antelope peacefully grazed in a prairie-dog town, paying no mind to the residents. Fred imagined how his trip home tonight would be with a radio in his car, playing as he drove along . . . hearing the crowd's ceaseless murmur during the pitch-by-pitch account of a baseball game . . . the announcer's exuberant blow-by-blow description at a boxing match.

A critter, too small to be an elk, too large to be a coyote, darted across the road into the thick bushes. Fred squinted to spot the critter. He saw only bushes. It was hidden in a thicket of tall scrub oaks and deer brush. He stopped the car and reversed. The trailing dust rolled over the Flint, obscuring the bushes. He stood down from the car and whisked toward the thicket of scrub oaks and deer brush.

"Hey, ya!"

No movement in the bushes.

He threw a rock into the bushes.

No movement.

Fred skittered around the clump of scrub oaks. Now he faced the road, the scrub oaks between him and the road. He threw another rock.

Vooooom! A powerful surge pounced from the bushes, slammed onto Fred and knocked him off his feet. They swiveled in the air—whiskers, warm breath, fangs, a mountain lion, Fred. They spun skyward, the lion's paws digging deeply into Fred's wide leather belt, the forepaws his breast. They were intertwined, man and lion, spinning and swiveling and falling. Midair, Fred clutched the lion's throat, squeezed, and pressed both thumbs deep into the softest part—thump!

The lion hit the ground, head striking a boulder. Fred landed on the lion, his miner's hard cap flinging forward. Gripping the neck, he pummeled the animal's head against the boulder, then stomped and kicked the ribs with his steel-toed boots—"like kicking a sand bag," Fred thought. The lion lay limp. So sudden, so fast, so furious, and now so limp. Seconds ago the lion had pounced with the force of an oncoming train but now appeared to be dead. Fred wedged his fingertips into the deep gashes that the lion's back paws had gouged in his leather belt. "That belt saved me," he thought, "without the belt, the lion woulda ripped my belly open, spilled my guts on the ground. I'd be dinner."

He trembled, frightened and shaken from the sudden attack, but felt no pain except the bitter taste of the tobacco he'd swallowed while swiveling in the air with the lion. Adrenaline surged throughout his body, coursing in his veins. His mind cleared and he looked more closely. The lion was a female, probably a mother. He dragged her away from the bushes, across the road's shoulder, and heaved her onto the floorboard of the Flint's backseat. He banged the door shut. The sound reverberated beyond the quiet roadside and echoed off the canyon wall. Fred's adrenaline continued to surge; his face flushed. He felt lightheaded.

Discovering his head was bare, he dashed to the bushes and searched for his hard cap, which set against a clump of

grass. He grabbed the hard cap, scrunched it over his head, and skipped back to the car, the motor still idling. He shifted into gear and off they sped at full throttle—the Flint, Fred, and the ol' mama lion going forty miles an hour, the Flint bouncing and jostling as they sped across the rocky, rutted road.

As they approached Koehler, a sudden weariness swept over Fred. The agitation of the terrifying encounter weighed him down. The adrenaline had stopped flowing, his sense of well-being displaced by a hollow feeling. He was confused and down in the mouth.

Fred's brother-in-law, Jay, waited at the long string of garages just north of the company store in Koehler. Fred wheeled the Flint in front of the garages. Pulling to a stop, he waved at Jay to approach the car.

"Seeing's believing. Come have a look-see, an ol' mama lion."

"I'll be . . . I'll be —"

"I'll be, nothing! She pretty near kilt me. Jumped me back-aways and threw me flyin' through the air. We spun like a sand devil till we hit the ground. Held onto her throat for dear life, then I kicked her in the head before she knew what hit her." Fred wasn't bragging about the encounter. Between spotting a critter dash across the road until this moment in front of the garage with Jay, everything was a blur, a dim memory of fear and fright like a bad dream that quickly fades upon awakening. Yet the unconscious mountain lion in the Flint and the gashes and holes in Fred's belt were proof enough. This was real, not a bad dream.

"You may have kicked her hard but you hardly killed her. She's a'movin'."

Fred poked his head into the window.

"Holy Toledo!"

"Could be she ain't all that old."

"Take a good look, wrinkles about her mouth . . . the gray whiskers."

Eyes glazed over, the ol' mama lion was groggy, barely rolling her head in a semiconscious stupor. Yet they gazed in

wonder, fascinated by the lion's muscular grace even as she lay limp in a stupor.

"She don't look too good. Don't think she'll jump us."

"She ain't gonna do nothing, most likely. Say, bring your coal bin. We'll make a cage for her. Hurry! I'll watch her."

Coal-camp houses were provided with a small bin kept on back porches or next to the kitchen stove. A three-by-five-foot pine box, it was used to store coal for heating and cooking. Jay ran to his house, emptied the bin, and brought it back to the garage.

Fred quietly entered the car from the right side and skulked across the seat. Jay opened the door on the left. Cautiously, they grasped the lion's forepaws, expecting a struggle, but she hardly moved. Fred noticed a bloody smear on the back of her head where she'd struck the boulder when she fell with his full weight on top of her.

They struggled with the dead weight while lifting her from the car, her heavy head hanging low. Without bumping her on the car floor or the ground, they gently hefted her into the coal bin. She slid snugly to the bottom. Fred hurriedly nailed a swath of meshed chicken wire over the bin's open face. She lay snugly in the cramped bin that was more like a straitjacket than a cage.

"Now what?"

"Beats me. Never had a mountain lion."

"Ho! Some folks *been* had by a mountain lion. . . ." Jay's voice trailed off. He was no better for ideas. Both were lost for words. Their eyes, hunting for answers, darted back and forth from the caged lion to each other and back to the caged lion. Suddenly, Fred's face flashed, "There's a zoo at Trinidad. It's a small one, for wild critters. Let's take her to them. They'll know what to do."

"Yeah! Sure! Good!" Both perked up. They lifted the dead weight of the coal bin containing the ol' mama lion onto the Flint's backseat. They sat in the car, motor still idling.

"Say, howse come you always idle the engine. Don't that burn gas?"

"Yeah, some, but I liked to broke my arm cranking her up."

"Kick pretty hard, huh?"

"Like a mule, 'cept she ain't stubborn." Fred shifted into gear. The car wobbled away from the garage and headed north on the road, passing Van Houten and Gardiner into Raton, jiggling and bouncing the coal miners and critter as it bounded over the dusty, rutted, and rocky roadbed.

Once in Raton, Fred slowed down, driving north on First Street. The hollow feeling returned. Fred was bothered by the eerie sense he was doing something wrong, but couldn't put his finger on it. "She'd be better off," he rationalized, "in the zoo where they'll feed her." He turned onto Moulton Avenue and headed west toward Raton Pass. The aching, eerie sense returned. Somehow, this was all wrong. He felt sorry for the ol' mama lion, once a wild critter who ranged freely in the hills. Now, she was beaten and caged, bound for captivity.

Fred's sadness deepened as the Flint started the slow ascent up the Pass. He felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. As the Flint wobbled around the curves of each switchback, Fred realized he, they, Jay and he were executioners delivering the ol' mama lion closer to her final doom. That's what bothered him. He had interfered with the ol' mama's daily hunt for food by cornering her in the bushes and then throwing rocks at her. He had attacked her; she retaliated out of self-defense, and he cold-cocked her, accidentally, but he might have killed her. She still might die.

Fred shifted into low gear. At the top of the Pass, he steered the Flint to the roadside, shifted to neutral, and pulled the handbrake, the motor idling.

"What gives?"

"Letting her out."

"She'll die out here."

"She'll die a slow death at the zoo, with people gawking at her. It ain't right."

Jay nodded assent. He felt better, too, and joined Fred, who was already pulling the coal bin from the backseat. They carried the bin into a thicket, set it upright, and yanked off the chicken wire. Gently, they leaned the bin on its side and backed away hastily, returning to the car.

Fred made a U-turn and headed back toward Raton. As they piddled along, Jay spotted a dead rabbit in the bar ditch beside the road.

“Stop the car! Food for her!”

Fred braked. Jay grabbed the dead rabbit, and they U-turned and headed back to where they'd left the lion. They bounded from the car with their dead gift and shoved aside the thick scrub oak and deer bushes until they found the bin.

“Thank the Lord, she's gone.”

“Yeah, she musta just plain lit outta here, once we left her. Guess she won't be needing this dead critter.” Jay tossed the rabbit into the bushes.

Fred shrugged his shoulders, raising the bill of his hard cap to scratch his forehead. “Maybe she was playin' possum, all along?”

Both hesitated. They weren't alone. In the trees to the west, magpies cackled nervously. Squirrels chiggered warnings of phantom predators. Deer mice scratched among fallen leaves in search of seeds. Brooding eyes watched every move.

Battle of the Brays

Dominic knew he was in trouble when he discovered his donkey missing one day before work. The gate to the pen was open and his donkey was gone, along with a bunch of others. The contrary donkeys didn't like underground work in the mine. After escaping from the pen, they skedaddled to high country to live year-round and, hiding in heavy brush, were nearly impossible to find. Donkeys cost a lot of money, and Dominic didn't want to pay the Company for the lost donkey. He hunted for it along Chicorica Creek, hiking up and down Sugarite Canyon, searching in the gullies among the willows and chokecherry bushes. No donkey.

He hiked to Johnson Mesa, where he scoured the thickets on the mesa's western slope. Still no donkey. He decided to search closer to home and returned to the donkey pen. On the matted ground around the pen, he spied donkey tracks, which blazed a trail toward the top of Bartlett Mesa, directly south of Sugarite. He followed the tracks and ascended the north side of the mesa. Hoof prints and trampled grass clearly marked the path. Higher up, the path turned rocky and prints were harder to spy. But he spotted fresh donkey droppings, which marked the path of the vagabond donkeys for a short while. Finally, he lost their path near the rim of the mesa in thick bushes and scrub oaks.

Still no donkey. Out of luck, he sat among the boulders of a kettle moraine and rested, pondering for a long time. While he pondered, the warm winter sun broke through the clouds. A gentle breeze carried the rustlings of wild turkeys, scratching the ground among scrub oak bushes, hunting for fallen acorns. He couldn't see the turkeys but recognized

Battle of the Brays

the sound of their distinct scratching. Dominic thought, "You can call a tom by gobbling for it. By golly, why not a donkey by braying?" Sucking huge swallows of air, he cupped his mouth with both hands, formed a megaphone, and bellowed the belches of a braying jenny: "Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh!"

Panicked by the bellowing brays, the antsy turkeys skittered and scattered. Ten jackasses burst from the bushes, including Dominic's. Promptly, he proudly pranced away like the Pied Piper, braying as the doughty donkeys dawdled along while Dominic dealt his song, "E-hooohh! E-hooohh!" Around the twisting path they wound down the mesa and marched back to the pen in Sugarite. There the kowtowed donkeys readily submitted to the command of Dominic's bray. Locking them in the pen, he scooted to the clubhouse, where a cavy of miners were relaxing, having a good time shooting pool, playing poker, and chewing the fat.

"Boys!" Dominic raised his voice, his head swelling with pride. The miners stopped what they were doing. "Whilst you was here killin' time, I rounded up my donkey."

"Oh, yeah? So? What of it?"

"I don't like to brag or nuthin', but I brayed home yer lost jackasses, too!"

"Huh! Naw! Shoot a'mighty! Go on! Bull!" They shouted chaotically.

"No bull, come to the pen, see fer yerself."

The men followed Dominic from the clubhouse to the pen near the mine entry. They were astounded to see the vagabond donkeys securely penned, although some miners couldn't find their lost donkeys among the recouped herd. They offered to pay Dominic to find their donkeys, but he wouldn't hear of it. "Boys, point me in the direction you figure them jackasses went. I'll bring'em home, free of charge."

They took Dominic at his word, describing what they knew about the whereabouts of their lost donkeys. Before long, Dominic was busy romping up and down the mesas, searching in the thick brush. When the brush became too dense, he bellowed brays that could split a sturdy stump.

Fortunately for the donkeys, the thick brush and scrub oaks softened Dominic's shrill pitch, "Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh!" As sure as pitch pours from piñon trees, vagabond donkeys poured from the thick brush, allowing him to herd them back to the pen in Sugarite.

Dominic's reputation spread throughout the coal camps, from down south at Dawson over to the north at Starkville on the Colorado side. He was one heck of a donkey brayer, a master of braying and bringing home lost donkeys. Miners from all the camps were begging Dominic to find their lost donkeys, praising him to high heaven. The adulation raised his self-estimation. He fantasized, "The second incarnation of John Henry, I am, the steel-driving man who died with a hammer in his hand. Just call me, 'Dominic, the donkey-driving drover, who wrests donkeys from the clover, to come his way on a bray.'" Because his head couldn't withstand the hot air pressure of further swelling, Dominic puffed his chest, pounded it, and bellowed, when the mood grabbed, "Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh!"

Wasn't long, Dominic's heroic euphoria subsided. He was losing money searching for lost donkeys by taking time from work. Yet miners continued to request his services. Before long, he adopted the American way, established a business enterprise, and started charging all but the Sugarite miners to search for their lost donkeys during the workday. Dominic painted a sign and put it on his wagon:

Dominic Thayer ~ donkey brayer!
Find your donkey, one dollar.

The envious miners from Yankee wouldn't hire Dominic to find their lost donkeys. "I'd dig coal in hell," Yankee miner Róqué Buska brashly vowed, "'fore I pay jackass Dominic to look for my donkeys." Not only was Dominic a good donkey brayer but he was also a good baseball player. Because of Dominic, the Sugarite baseball team often beat the Yankee team. "Dominic, king of the jackasses and the Sugarite boohoos," the Yankees groused. Resentment festered among them, and every time they spotted a miner from Sug-

arite, they'd bellow out of spite and envy, "He-Haw! He-Haw! Jack-assssses! He-Haw! He-Haw! Jack-assssses!"

Momentarily, the Sugarite miners tolerated the indignity, smugly declaring the Yankee miners didn't bray half as good as Dominic. Only Dominic could bray so a donkey actually believed it was the bray of another donkey. They struggled to ignore the Yankee miners. "Let them Yankee yahoos make jackasses of themselves," the Sugarite miners muttered, none too happy. They were proud of the one and only coal-camp baseball slugger and supreme donkey brayer, Dominic Thayer.

The Sugarite miners failed in their attempt to ignore the yahoos. The Yankee bellows became intolerable when they spread their enmity to any and all of the Sugarite folks—men, women, and children. Everywhere the Yankee yahoos went, Raton or other coal camps, they brazenly blurted out donkey brays in their own asinine way. No place was sacred, not even the doors of St. Joseph's, where "He Haw, He Haw, Jack-assssses" was blurted furtively behind cupped hands as Sugarite folks were leaving church services on Sunday mornings.

Sunday afternoon baseball games were packed with Yankee fans, who brayed every time a ball was pitched to Sugarite players. On First Street in Raton, where Sugarite families shopped on Saturdays, Yankee yahoos' brays were as common as gnats in the donkey pen. The yahoos thought nothing of belching brays in the Silver Moon Café when Sugarite families dined there on Saturday evenings. The brays weren't good for business, but they kept the flies away.

The straw that broke the backs of the Sugarite boochoos was struck at the Raton High School graduation, normally a proud time for parents. At the ceremony, the graduating students were bunched according to their respective camps. That way, Yankee students could receive their diplomas together, and so on down the line of coal camps Gardiner, Swastika, Van Houten, Koehler, Sugarite, and Yankee. Right at the moment when the Sugarite seniors took the stage to receive their diplomas, the yahoo fathers of the Yankee se-

niors stood up and bellowed insolently, “He-Haw! He-Haw! Jack-assssses!” Then, each time a Sugarite senior’s name was called, brazen brays resounded. The Yankee yahoos brayed so loud, it was impossible to hear the superintendent call out the students’ names to receive their diplomas.

On stage, the superintendent and the school board members maintained their poise, acting as though nothing was amiss. A mumbling murmur arose in the audience among the bewildered Raton crowd. Some held coal miners in low estimate, and the braying Yankee miners caused their estimate to plummet lower. Sugarite boochoos were offended and outraged. The Yankee yahoos made jackasses of themselves, and of Sugarite boochoos, too.

But what could they do? They couldn’t raise a ruckus during the graduation ceremony without validating the low estimate of coal miners held by Raton folks. Boiling hot, they fumed among themselves and vowed vengeance. After the graduation ceremony, the Sugarite boochoos gathered at the Silver Moon Café. Fed up with the Yankees’ asinine insults and brash brays, they plotted revenge.

Next Sunday evening, the Sugarite miners skulked to the donkey barns in Yankee, herded the donkeys from the pens, drove them to the side of Johnson Mesa, and set them free. When the Yankee miners came to work Monday morning, all their donkeys were gone. They found a crudely painted sign scrawled by the Sugarite boochoos:

You called our kids—jack-assssses!
We freed your donkeys—en mass-s-s-ses!

The Yankee miners didn’t waste time fuming. Enraged, they declared war against the Sugarite miners, choosing Róqué Buska to be their leader. He smelled so strong the weeds shriveled when he watered his garden patch and no coal camp woman could stand near him, much less kiss him. He rarely bathed for fear of losing his boxer’s edge. Before he took up coal mining, he was a bare-fisted boxer and claimed to box against Jack Dempsey when the heavy-weight boxer lived in Colorado. Róqué ordered the miners

to bring dynamite, picks, and shovels to give the Sugarite boys a good bashing.

Good thing not every man in the coal camps was a miner. Hank Peppin was a carpenter who worked at both Sugarite and Yankee mines. He knew the men loved to squabble and got carried away with horseplay. From Dominic's first public bray in the Sugarite clubhouse to the release of the Yankee donkeys, Hank had watched the horseplay with a worried, weary eye. What had begun as rowdy horseplay was devolving into an outright brawl. Hank feared the worst when he saw the Yankee miners armed to the teeth with Róqué as the leader.

Hank hopped on his donkey and rode ahead to warn the Sugarite miners, as quickly as his plodding donkey could trot. Hank arrived in Sugarite just as the men were hitching up their donkeys to enter the mine. They were in a jovial mood, throwing jibes and popping cracks about the Yankee miners, knowing the yahoos were without donkeys to work. Some boohoos spotted Hank as he approached, bouncing astride the plodding donkey and shouting frantically, "There's gonna be a war! There's gonna be a war!"

"Eh, Hank! Ma che dici?—Whatta ya saying?" So they scoffed in Italian.

"There's gonna be a war!" He repeated the warning.

"Eh, poco loco en la cabaza?—Are you a little crazy in the head?" The men badgered Hank in Spanish.

"No! There's mucho grande trouble comin' this-a-way!" Hank mocked their Spanish.

"Eh, what say ye?" Dominic stepped forward.

"The boys from Yankee are coming to kill you!" Hank blurted out. "Róqué Buska's the leader. They're bringing dynamite! Picks! Shovels!"

While the men badgered Hank with questions, a tumultuous outcry of angry voices erupted. Yankee miners, brandishing picks, shovels, and sticks of dynamite, appeared trudging before a rolling gray cloud spiraling off the dusty road east of Sugarite. Their voices thundered above the road in vitriolic outbursts:

Battle of the Brays

“Durn fools! Turn our donkeys out, hey! This dynamite stick’ll show ’em! My pick’s sharp on both ends! This shovel’ll bash in more’n one head! Thick-headed bunch of jackasses! Boochoos soon be crying!”

“Boys!” Dominic called the Sugarite miners to action, “get yer dynamite and picks and shovels!” They rushed to the tool shed, grabbing picks, shovels, crowbars, and sticks of dynamite. The rumbling roar of their resentment reverberated from the tool shed: “It’s a war they want! We’ll give ’em one! Jackasses! Gull durn fools! We’ll blow ’em to kingdom come! Cocky yahoos!”

The Sugarite miners jostled for positions, forming three rows in front of the donkey pen. They, too, brandished picks, shovels, and dynamite sticks ready to blast. They surged forward to confront the Yankee miners. Before anybody could throw blows, Hank jumped between the two furious armies of yahoos and boochoos. He hollered, “This battle of the brays is back-asswards! It’s mainly malarkey and for the birds! You miners from Yankee made fun of Dominic, jist ’cause he’s one heck of a donkey brayer. You miners from Sugarite can’t take a little joke. Not even a little poke. So now you’re gonna fight. Dontcha know? Hot words lead to cold slabs.”

For a moment, the miners halted, dumbstruck, but the calm didn’t last long. They reverted to battle positions, throwing epithets and insults at each other.

“A-A-A! You boochoos reek like Limburger cheese!” The Yankee yahoos yelled.

“You yahoos stink like a foul breeze!” The Sugarite boochoos hurled their insults.

“Fighting’s in our blood!” Róqué badgered.

“Yeah! Yeah!” Other Yankee miners shouted in agreement.

“Ours, too!” Dominic shouted back, “and we’re the best at it.”

The miners on both sides were riled up, itching to throw the first blow. Previously, their outrage was silly, almost com-

Battle of the Brays

ical. Now it was dangerous. They had cursed and brayed themselves into a bloody war.

“Boys! Boys!” Hank raised his voice above the roaring mob. “You’re the best durn miners in the coal camps. You’re just riled up. What do you want to do, kill each other? That won’t prove who’s the best, just the deadest. Sure, one side wins. They’re the best. Another time, the other side wins. They’re the best. You proved nothing. What you will prove is you *are* jackasses, the whole lot of you.”

“Aw, shut up! Outta the way! Move it! Yer a dead man!”

Hank didn’t flinch. He admonished, “You Sugarite miners, your puffed up heads far outweigh your ability!”

“Yeah! Bravo!” The Yankee yahoos cheered in agreement. The Sugarite boohoos sulked.

“You Yankee miners, your bruised conceit far exceeds the wrong done to ya!”

“Humph! Ho!” The Sugarite boohoos cheered in agreement. The Yankee yahoos sulked.

A lull in the furor and tumult fell over the mob. Yahoos and boohoos alike stood somber, silent, sullen. . . .

Hank’s donkey erupted in brays: “Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh! Eh-ooohh!” Pandemonium erupted. The miners attacked Hank from all sides. He spurred his donkey up the mesa trail Dominic had taken a few months before to find the lost donkey that sparked the battle of the brays. The men, stumbling over each other, surged up the trail in hot pursuit, hurling a cacophony of chaotic curses, clogging the way with their fuming.

Hank coaxed the donkey higher. The miners hurled more curses and threats and pitched their tools at Hank and his fast trotting donkey. Hank managed to stay ahead of the flying barrage of shovels, picks, and crowbars. The two armies of boohoos and yahoos merged into one ragtag mob tripping over tools and each other. Some stumbled over small piles of big men while others crawled out from under the piles, only to stumble over the tool-strewn trail. The men forgot for the moment to take sides as yahoos and boohoos. Instead, they joined to hurl curses and epithets at Hank.

Fearing the miners were gaining ground and would soon mangle him into buzzard bait, Hank glanced back and saw an immobile mass of mingled miners, writhing and twisting, their bodies contorted in sweaty, stinky piles. He turned the donkey about and trotted back to the swarming mêlée. The miners were piled upon each other, forming a large mound where the trail narrowed. Some were tugging tools between them, trying to wrest them away. Others were flailing their arms and legs, attempting to pull themselves from under the colossal brawling pile of sweaty, stinky bodies.

“Ho! Ho!” Hank laughed mightily, “see what ya done. You piled yourselves into a heap of a smelly mess. Suits you right.” Hank dismounted and started pulling the men apart, tugging their arms and legs. “Boys, looka the stinkin’ mess you made. Now, help each other! Break up the piles, find yer tools.”

To Hank’s surprise, the miners pitched in to help. The flame to fight had smothered under the swell of sweaty bodies. They no longer stood divided as Yankee yahoos and Sugarite boohoos. They were just men, tangled together in tawdry piles. As they unraveled, snickers, then chortles resounded. Soon the men rocked in hardy guffaws. Hank joined the laughter. . . .

Before the guffaws quelled and the laughter subsided, Hank gently admonished, “Now, boys, any jackass can kick out a barn door. It takes a man to build a barn.”

“What? Huh? Hey?” The men were miners and didn’t understand the carpenter’s proverb.

“We gotta find a better way to prove who’s the best. Maybe a game of boccie, soccer, or baseball?”

“I vote for baseball! Boccie! Soccer!” They shouted chaotically.

Nobody seemed to agree on a single game. Above the raucous roar of contending clamor, Hank called for a vote.

“Boys, let’s do her democratic. Let’s vote. All in favor of boccie, yell ‘aye.’ ”

“Aye,” some shouted sluggishly.

“Soccer?”

Battle of the Brays

“Aye,” yelled lukewarm.

“And baseball?”

“AYE! AYE!” A roar raised raucously.

“It’s baseball! Now, let’s all go home before we change our minds.”

Feed Him Black Chickens

“Hurry! Out the back! Fidel’s coming!” The young miner fumbled to button his shirt, scooped up his jacket, and scooted out the back door. Cimarron threw herself on the loveseat and hastily lit a cigarette.

Fidel plodded through the front door, grumpy from a long hard day at the mine. He spotted Cimarron lounging in the loveseat, her nightgown hanging seductively on one shoulder. With legs crossed and a high-heel slipper dangling on her big toe, she blew smoke rings into the stale living-room air.

“Órale, Fidel. You’re home early, sí no?”

“Is my bath ready?” Fidel hung his mining gear, unsnapping the straps of his bib overalls, preparing to remove them.

“You bet! In a jiffy!” She snuffed out the cigarette, slipped from the loveseat, and gamboled into the kitchen where she stoked the *fogón* to heat water for Fidel’s bath. “Be a good oso,” Cimarron purred, “bring some small coal chunks for the fire.”

“Ójala, honey. No fire in the stove, no water for my bath, don’t you see how black I am from the dust in the mine?” He pulled his bib overall straps back in place and loaded some pea-coal into the stove. “What gives?”

“Sweetie pie, I liked it better when you were on the graveyard shift. Can’t get used to you coming home in the afternoon. Aren’t you early today?”

“Qué early! I stopped at the clubhouse. Had two beers with the boys. Woulda been home sooner, but we argued a long time.”

“Over what?”

"Baseball."

"Baseball?"

"Sí, baseball. Rumors are the Company won't buy uniforms for our team, if we go Union."

Cimarron didn't have an inkling as to the importance of baseball to the miners and the company men. She changed the subject. "Sweetie pie, bring some water from the pump to warm up for your bath," Cimarron purred with her soft, kittenlike voice. "I'll get the fire going in the *fogón*."

"Bueno, hey." Fidel had no defense against the sweet young coquette, who easily melted his bearish heart. He grabbed a bucket and walked to the backyard pump for water. He placed the bucket of cold water on the *fogón* to heat while he fetched another bucket. By borrowing buckets from the neighbors, he finally had six buckets of cold water heating.

"This will take much time. How come you haven't been warming water all day, like you're supposed to?"

Cimarron wouldn't say she was entertaining young miners at the house and didn't have time to warm water. Instead, she purred like a kitten, clasping her hands lovingly around Fidel's strong arm. "I dunno, sweetie pie. I just forgot. You know, my mama thought I was too young to be a wife."

"And, what about supper? Have you no food?" Fidel flexed the muscles in his arm, shaking loose Cimarron's hands.

"Boo-hoo-hoo!" She clutched a handkerchief, sniffing and sobbing. "You don't love me. You just married me to have a slave. Boo-hoo-hoo."

"Honey bun, I love you very much, but that's your job, to fix the bath, and meals."

"Oh, boo-hoo-hoo. I'm going to the chapel to pray to our Savior. Boo-hoo-hoo." Cimarron draped an overcoat over her gown.

"Honey, wait! I'll go with you."

"No!" She turned, snuffing her nose with the handkerchief. "You stay there! Fix your own bath!"

Fidel was puzzled. On Sundays, Cimarron had to be dragged kicking and screaming to church. Here she was

now, going to church on a workday without any coaxing. She tottered and flip-flopped in her high-heeled slippers along the rocky path circling the base of the hill to the little chapel, which was snuggled in a cove where the hills converge. Her ankles twisted and knees knocked against each other as she traversed the path's lopsided terrain, but she was determined to find a solution to her problem.

When she faded from view, Fidel dashed out the back door for a shortcut to the chapel over the hill behind the house. Rapidly, he scrambled over the small hill separating the chapel from the house. Puffing heavily when he arrived at the chapel door, he dashed in just before Cimarron arrived.

The small chapel contained a tiny altar and pews. Seeking to hide, he darted behind a bulky, tall statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that stood on a pedestal at the side of the altar behind the communion rail. Candles flickered in the statue's votive stand. He crouched behind the statue, catching his breath.

Cimarron marched into the chapel and raised a shawl over her hair. Upon seeing the flickering votive candles before the statue, she lowered her glance. She didn't notice Fidel behind the statue. She knelt at the communion rail in front of the Sacred Heart statue, crossed herself, and prayed softly:

"Oh, dear Lord, please help me." She prayed with the soft purr of a kitten in the same coquettish tone she used with the old miner. "My Fidel, he's an old man. He doesn't like to dance or have parties. He just wants to take baths and eat. I'm just a young girl. He's no fun. When I married him, people said he would soon die. That's why I married him, to get his money. But already a year has passed, oh, boo-hoo-hoo. He hasn't died, and he isn't rich! Oh, boo-hoo-hoo." Cimarron blew into a handkerchief, cleared her nostrils, and wiped away the tears of genuine self-pity.

As Fidel listened, he acknowledged to himself that he had lied to her, saying he had won much money at poker, that he had a bad heart, and the company doctor gave him a short time to live. He rationalized, "The lies were necessary

to convince Cimarron to marry me to do my bidding." Now he recognized she was not the innocent kitten she seemed to be. He took a deep breath and spoke in a heavy baritone voice as he imagined the majesty of the Lord Himself, scoffing in a booming voice from behind the statue:

"What do you want, my child?"

Cimarron jerked her head upright, craning her neck to see who might be in the chapel. She saw no one. Startled but pleased, Cimarron believed she was talking to the Lord in the personage of the statue. She bowed her head to the statue, hands resting on the communion rail. "Oh, my Lord, I have many problems with Fidel. He complains all the time about his bath and about his meals. He's an old man. He doesn't like to have fun. He just wants me to work all the time and be his slave."

Such vanity, Fidel thought. She thinks the Lord is talking to her.

Fidel grew ornery and admonished her. "My child, since you married Fidel, you haven't lifted a finger in the house—"

"Not true! When the Victrola broke, I fixed it."

"Ühh, pues! You got a new needle for it so you—"

"Pos! Fidel didn't lift a finger to fix it! The old oso didn't care that it was broken."

"My child, you only fixed it to party. Qué no?"

"Como no? I needed it to dance."

"What about cleaning the house? Warming the water for a bath? And cooking meals?"

"Oh, they're not important! Say, whose side are you on, anyway?" As quickly as Cimarron had snapped defensively, she abruptly stopped speaking. A nippy, chilly pause ensued. . . . After a chilly moment, Cimarron blurted out, "Say! You sure know a lot about me and Fidel!"

Fidel panicked, thinking she might be suspicious and expose his pontifical posture. He feigned impatience to conceal his fear of exposure. "My child, my child. I am the Lord. I know everything."

"Oh."

Another nippy, chilly pause.

"My dear Lord, I ask for very little. I would like to have parties at the house, when Fidel is at work. Now he's on the day shift. He comes home when I am having a party. If only he couldn't see me having parties," Cimarron purred.

"Yes, yes, what do your propose?"

"Well, uh . . . could you make him blind?"

"Blind?" Fidel's voice almost cracked, but he recovered soon enough to assume a more solemn tone, "Are you certain? A blind man can't work."

"Oh, no, not all the time." Cimarron amended her request, "just when he's home. He could regain his sight in the morning, just in time to go to the mine."

"¿Porque? What for, such a strange prayer?" Again, Fidel almost revealed his true identity. Pretending to be the Lord is not easy, when your wife is asking the Lord to blind you.

Cimarron continued her simpering tones. "Cuz my Lord, if he cannot see at home, he won't see my many boyfriends at the house."

"Por Dios, my child!" Fidel forced himself to sound regal. "Even if I make him blind, he will still hear you and your boyfriends as you party."

"Well, can you think of a better solution?"

"Bah!" Fidel felt intensely the part of the Grand Patriarch. "If you would read my books you would know God helps he who helps himself."

"But, I am not a 'he.' I am a young girl."

"Don't jest with me child! Will you read my books?"

Head still bowed, Cimarron meditated long and hard, groping for a solution. In sporadic flashes of vain notions, her mind gradually illuminated. Slowly, she turned her gaze toward the statue's face, still believing she was talking to the Lord. "My dear Lord," she purred softly, batting her eyelashes, "I promise to read your books, and can you make him deaf, too?"

Fidel's knees buckled. He clutched them to keep from falling and knocking down the statue, "But, my child—"

"My dear Lord, only at home! Make him deaf and blind at home." She pleaded with such feigned innocence and sweetness she could fool the Lord.

Fidel's hair bristled. He was angry, hurt, and faced with the truth. I was a fool to lie to Cimarron, he thought. What could a young girl want with an old man?

Engrossed in certified self-pity, Fidel barely caught Cimarron's last words: ". . . blind and deaf, only at home."

"Bueno, hay, my child!"

Fidel almost fouled up. The Lord would never speak in slang. Yet Cimarron hadn't noticed, delighted the Lord had agreed to her solution. Fidel changed the tone of his voice to sound as though he were warning. "All good things come to those who are patient. We must go slow. Or Fidel will surely catch on, and your goose will be cooked. Do as I say, and you will get what you want."

"Oh, my dear Lord, I will obey. What must I do?"

Fidel started, alarmed by Cimarron's enthusiastic zeal to have him deaf and dumb. And he wasn't sure what to tell her. He needed a plan to buy some time to figure out a solution. While he struggled for a good response, Cimarron began to fidget, agitated by the Lord's delay.

Haltingly, Fidel answered in regal tones: "Each day, prepare his bath, so he may clean himself, when he comes home from the mine covered with dust."

"That's all?"

"For now, my child. If you must, come to see me again, if he does not go blind and deaf. And don't forget to read my books."

Cimarron crossed herself and hastened out the chapel. When she arrived home, Fidel was there, pouring the warm water for his bath, puffing as he poured.

"No! No!" Cimarron insisted in a falsetto voice, "that's my job. Get ready for your bath. I'll pour the water."

Fidel smiled, pleased with the results of his performance, thinking he had missed his true calling as an actor. Cimarron happily poured the water for the tub and hummed as she laid out the soap, washcloth, and towel. Fidel sat in the

tub—splish, splash! He washed himself merrily, singing and humming while she rinsed his back.

“Oh, sweetie pie, I’m glad you’re so happy,” Cimarron shouted at Fidel over his loud singing.

“HEY?” Fidel cupped his ear, “speak louder! Can barely hear you.”

Cimarron clasped her hands and prayed silently, “Oh, thank you, thank you, Lord. Already your plan is working.”

After Fidel bathed, he dried and dressed himself, feigning a slight loss of sight. He fumbled with his shirt buttons. “Honey, please help me with these buttons. Not enough light in the house.”

“Oh, yes, honey. Here I will help. Before you sit to relax, honey, where is your Bible?”

“Bible?”

“Honey, I want to read the Lord’s books.”

“HEY?” Fidel cupped his ears.

“THE BIBLE!” Cimarron screamed.

“Good, good,” Fidel chortled as he pointed to the bottom drawer of the dresser.

Both went to sleep happy. Cimarron had to lead Fidel to the bed where he listened while Cimarron lisped the opening pages of the Book of Genesis. Their secret, separate plans were working perfectly.

When Fidel arrived home from work the next day, a warm bath awaited with soap, towel, and washcloth laid out. Again, as he bathed, he feigned a slight loss of hearing and seeing. After supper, Cimarron excused herself to pray at the chapel. Again, Fidel ran the shortcut over the hill. Entering the chapel, he crouched behind the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and awaited her arrival. Again, Cimarron knelt at the communion rail in a pious posture and prayed in simpering tones:

“My dear Lord, thank you for making Fidel deaf and blind. But he’s only a little bit deaf and a little bit blind.”

“Not too fast, my child. Fidel is a smart man. He will catch on, and then your goose will be cooked.”

“But, my dear Lord—”

"Ah, my child, you're young, and full of life. Go slow, believe me, this will work."

"Is there more I could do, to speed up the plan?"

"Hija! Slow down! You want too much, too fast."

"My, my dear Lord. You're irritated."

"Well, it's offensive to me—"

"The Lord takes offense? How's that? You're the Great, the All-Knowing, All-Powerful Lord." Cimarron's feline instincts told her when to flatter and cajole, even the Lord it seems.

"You are right, my child. I will be more patient. As for Fidel, every day make ready ironed pants and starched shirts for him to wear."

Cimarron crossed herself and went home pleased with the plan.

The very next day, Fidel came home to a splendid ritual of a warm bath, followed by freshly ironed pants and starched shirt. With each passing day, Fidel pretended to be more blind and deaf. With each passing day, Cimarron followed the same routine. Yet the results of the routine were not sufficient to satisfy Cimarron. Fidel retained just enough vision and hearing to prevent her from having parties.

She grew impatient. Thus far her routine was all work and no parties. On a regular basis, in the evenings when she thought that Fidel was immobile due to his modest impairments, she sneaked from the house to visit the statue. Unknown to her, so did Fidel. At each visit, the statue cautioned against haste; at each visit, the statue gave her more duties. Predictably, with each new duty, Fidel's senses dimmed at home. Miraculously, each morning his sight and hearing would return in time for him to walk to the mine to work.

Two months passed. Cimarron still had no parties. It was time for another visit to the chapel. Again, Fidel took his position behind the statue.

"My dear Lord," Cimarron began her maudlin prayer in the same simpering manner with a slight hint of irritation in her voice. "Things are going too slow. Already, I fix Fidel a warm breakfast, mop the floor, shake the rugs, dust the

furniture, wash his clothing, starch and iron his shirts and pants. Each day, I prepare a warm bath for him. And I have read your books.” Cimarron stopped abruptly, glared at the statue, and shrieked: “Are you listening to me!”

“Sí, señora. You are a good worker and a good wife.”

“My dear Lord, what more can I do? At home, Fidel can barely see or hear me. Yet, I can’t party, for he can still see and hear a little bit.”

“Feed him black chickens.”

“Black chickens?”

“Yes, my child. Feed him the meat of the chicken with black feathers. Those are his favorite. Each day, bake a black chicken, with all the trimmings. And don’t forget the stuffing.”

“My, you know much about Fidel.”

“Of course. I am his maker.”

“Already, I do much for him.”

“My child, try the black chickens. You shall see.”

The next day, Cimarron rose early and prepared a hardy breakfast of bacon, eggs, tortillas, and coffee for Fidel. After he left to work, she busied herself cleaning the house, weeding the garden, washing Fidel’s clothing, starching and ironing the shirts and pants. When she finished, she went to the coop and found a black-feathered chicken. She twisted its neck and plucked it. She ground stale bread and the chicken’s heart, liver, and gizzards to prepare stuffing. As the chicken baked with the stuffing in its cavity, she carried cold water from the pump for Fidel’s bath and warmed it.

When Fidel came home that evening, a warm tub of water waited, along with freshly washed longjohns. The pants and shirt were also starched and ironed. The table was laid out with a sumptuously baked chicken on a platter, stuffed and surrounded with freshly picked vegetables from the garden. After Fidel bathed and dressed, he complained of fuzzy vision and deafness. He asked, rubbing his eyes, “Honey, did a thunderstorm come as I bathed?”

“No-o,” she replied quizzically. “Why do you ask?”

“Maybe you doused the lights?”

“Ójala, sweetie pie,” Cimarron perked up. It was five P.M. Outside, the sun beamed brightly.

“Ey-y-y?” Fidel cupped a hand about his ears, “ey-y-y, can’t hear you.”

“Don’t worry,” Cimarron cooed coyly. She could hardly contain herself, but she bit the inside of her cheek to compel herself to feign concern for Fidel. “You work too hard. You’ll feel better after you eat.”

Fidel, too, bit his lip to feign the disabilities, but his heart beat rapidly while sweat poured down his forehead at the thought of eating the delicious meal.

“Honey, are you getting a fever?” Cimarron wiped Fidel’s brow, sweat sticking to her palm.

“O, no, pájarita—oh, no, Chickadee,” Fidel crooned, telling the truth. “The smell of the chicken, and all the trimmings, they make my heart beat too fast.”

“Well, come, eat, before you have a heart attack.” Cimarron escorted Fidel to the table, thinking to herself, “Heart attack, no such luck.”

They sat while Fidel ate the lavish meal, succoring the juicy chicken meat and crisp vegetables. He ladled extra gravy over the stuffing. As he ate the last of the stuffing, he complained: “Oh, honey, I can barely see? Did you turn out the lights?”

“No, sweetie pie. They’re burning bright.”

“HEY? Speak louder. Can’t hear you.” Fidel flailed his hands, grasping for the air as though he couldn’t see or hear anything.

“Probecito,” Cimarron feigned concern to mask her delight. She thought, Finally the old oso can’t see or hear anything.

“HEY?” Fidel cupped his ears, standing and knocking the chair on its back. He started to walk with both arms stretched out and his eyes glazed over as though they could not focus. He stumbled into the table and fell to the floor. “Honey, help me stand. I can’t see or hear!”

Cimarron bent over, grabbing Fidel by the arm. She tugged on his arm, and he pulled her down, pretending

to be grappling to stand. Cimarron fell on him, and they rolled over twice on the floor before Fidel stopped, lying flat on his back. Fidel knew he must play the part of an enfeebled old man. Meekly, he grasped his petite young bride with a limp bear hug.

Awkwardly but easily, Cimarron unraveled herself from Fidel's feeble grasp. When she released his limp arms from around her back, she stood and grasped him by the chest. With some effort, and help from Fidel, she managed to lift him. Leaning on her, Fidel waddled while Cimarron led him to the loveseat. Eyes cast to the floor, he tumbled into the loveseat and pretended to fall into a deep slumber, snoring as he had never snored before.

She cleared the table, put away the leftover food, and washed the dishes. Now she could party. Cimarron went about gaily washing herself, applying fresh makeup, and selecting a clean dress while Fidel blithely snored in a deep, pretentious slumber. As she readied her hair, her bones began to ache and her muscles stiffened. Her brisk, energetic pace slowed. She was exhausted from a long hard day of work.

She was too tired to party. Instead, she went to the chapel. Once more, Fidel took the shortcut and crouched behind the statue, satisfied that his stellar acting had duped his carefree young bride. With bowed head, she knelt before the statue, hands resting on the communion rail and cupped in prayer.

She started softly . . . slowly: "Oh, my dear Lord. You have given me what I want. But it's too hard, what I must do, to have Fidel deaf and blind."

"Qué va! Of course, my child, it's hard, but that is the lot of women. You must party only after you have done your duties."

"Oh, dear Lord, I'm too tired after I have done all my duties to have parties."

"You're just a lazy, worthless good-for-nothing!"

"My dear Lord? Hmm, you sound just like Fidel."

"Well, you should be glad Fidel married you."

“Just like an old man. You old men stick up for each other.”

“Es verdad, I am old, but I speak as your Heavenly Father, not as an old man.”

“I don’t care. You’re no different than Fidel. You would have me be his slave.”

“But, my child, that is the lot of married women, if you would only read my books carefully, you would know—”

“Well, forget it! I never liked your old books!” In a tizzy, she pranced out, slammed the door, and never returned to the chapel, to the statue, or to Fidel.

Mail-Order Baba

July 1920

"You're as frisky as a sack of cats. What's the hurry?" Floyd Butts admonished his younger partner, Louie Wooten, for nearly knocking over a load of packages.

Floyd and Louie had a freight business delivering goods between Trinidad and its southern neighbors. Business was pretty good, and now they'd been granted a new short-term contract with the postal service. A washed-out bridge prevented the train from making its daily run south over Raton Pass. They'd agreed that Floyd would deliver the mail to Raton and its surrounding ranches. Louie would deliver to the surrounding coal camps of Gardiner, Koehler, Sugarite, Swastika, Van Houten, and Yankee. That made their daily run longer, but they appreciated the extra money, especially since it would end once the bridge was repaired.

"Gotta git home early; gotta date with Bobbie Jo fer the dance tonight."

"Ooooo-eeee, howse come a pretty gal like Bobbie Jo would go ta the dance with a gopher like you?" Floyd teased his partner.

"Dunno. Must be my smarts."

"Oh, yeah! See them two teams," Floyd nodded to the two teams of mules already hitched to their respective wagons, "Anyone of them's got more brains than you."

"Well, if'n it's not my looks and not my brains, then I reckon it's my charm."

"Yeah, I reckon. You're jist a reg-u-lar Prince Charmin'."

"Looka who's callin' the pot black! You don't have a gal to take to the dance."

The two men continued their friendly banter as they finished loading the wagons with sundry boxes and pouches. Louie hastily strapped down his load, mounted his wagon, and scooted out of Trinidad, leaving Floyd behind. Floyd watched Louie hurriedly clip-clop away. Floyd was in no hurry. He always enjoyed the view to the west, especially the gleaming Sangre de Cristo peaks aglow as their shrinking snowcaps shimmered in the bright July sun. Floyd let his mules set the pace. Clippity-clop, clippity-clop, clippity-clop.

Farther up the pass, Louie hied his mules at a faster pace. Clip-clop! Clip-clop! Clip-clop! Field mice and bushy-tailed squirrels, disturbed by the creaking wagon, scampered farther into the scrub oaks and ponderosas along the road, which was once a part of the Santa Fe Trail.

When the Spaniards came to these hills in the 1700s, they noticed the great number of moles, mice, and bushy-tailed squirrels and named the hills after the rodents, *la montaña de los ratonnes*, or the “Raton Mountains.” When Anglo freighters first crossed the pass on the Santa Fe Trail, their Spanish maps showed it to traverse mountains dubbed Ratonnes. They called the crossing Raton Pass. Later, sometime about 1880, the small railroad town that formed at the foot of the pass was called Raton.

Floyd continued his slow pace—clippity-clop, clippity-clop, clippity-clop—while Louie and his mules sped over the top of the pass onto the undulating road that rose and fell with the swell of the hills until reaching the sharp descent into Raton, four steep switchbacks. The mules’ momentum spurred them on even faster—Clap! Clap! Clap!

A bushy-tailed squirrel darted across the road. The mules snorted, reared on their heels, and then veered to the side. The wagon careened toward the bank. Louie threw the reins and jumped just as the wagon’s right front wheel rolled over the edge of the shoulder. Louie tumbled onto the rocky, dusty road. The dirt under the wheel gave way. The wagon tipped to its side, slid down the bank, and dragged the mules with it. The mules slid down the bank on their sides, one directly

behind the other. Pouches and boxes flew into the air, tilting, tumbling, and bouncing. Some jammed against bushes; others split open, spewing letters and pouches along the bank. Most of the haul, like the wagon and mules, landed on the switchback below. Shaking his head to clear the haze, Louie dropped to his rear end and slid down the rocky bank to the wagon.

Meanwhile, at the crest of the pass, Floyd heard the commotion and saw a cloud of dust rising from below. He hied his mules a little faster. "Durn fool," he muttered, clucking his mules a bit faster.

Down on the switchback, Louie's mules struggled to their feet. Louie, still a little dazed, inspected them for broken legs or other injuries. Other than some scrapes and scratches, they appeared to be all right. The wagon seemed to be in one piece, although it was tilted on its side. As Louie struggled to tip it upright, Floyd arrived.

"Durn fool," Floyd admonished Louie. "Ya coulda got yerself killed. All this rushin' around."

He helped tip the wagon upright. They inspected it carefully—no broken axles or loose wheels. They were lucky; the harness, hitches, and traces were intact, though tangled and twisted. They unhitched the team, petting and sweet-talking the jittery mules to calm them down, and then hitched them up again. Louie and Floyd gathered the strewn boxes, pouches, and letters. They took one last look around and inspected under bushes and in crevices, searching for any they'd missed.

"Looks like we got 'er all."

Over his fright, Louie's face reddened, "Mum's the word?"

"Yeah, well, this never happened." Floyd agreed because he didn't want to endanger their mail contract.

They departed and gingerly descended the remaining switchbacks into Raton. Louie promptly passed through Raton and made his delivery to the post offices at the coal camps. Floyd made a stop at the Raton Post Office and then took off for his ranch deliveries.

Mail-Order Baba
Christmas 1950

Christmas dinner was eaten. Rose and Belle were washing dishes. Rose's husband, George, was dozing in his chair. Belle's husband was playing Monopoly with some of the children. Pete excused himself and stepped outside to the porch. The warm winter sun felt pleasant. A tranquil calm prevailed. The air was dry and clear, and there was no snow on the ground. The lawn was damp from an overnight freezing rain. The barren elms and cottonwoods dripped their coats of ice. Johnson Mesa loomed on the eastern horizon, its rimrocks frosted with snow. Pete puffed thoughtfully on his cigar; Rose and Belle, who always chided Pete about his smoking, had surprised him with a box of Garcia y Vega cigars for a Christmas present.

He thought about his twin girls. They were good girls and very close. Even after marriage, they chose to live next door to each other. Rose's home was built onto the back of George's filling station on Moulton Avenue, right at the foot of Old Raton Pass. George had started out selling gas and oil, but after the new pass opened, he expanded into the auto repair business. Belle and her husband, Raymond, lived next door. Raymond helped George with the station in his spare time. Pete had a good family, but at times he was lonely without a wife.

"Gran'pa, let's go squirrel hunting." Pete's grandson Jozef popped out of the house onto the porch.

"How'd you think of that?"

"I'm bored."

Jozef was much like Pete, always anxious to keep busy. Pete was the same, always busy. After his wife, Rita, died from influenza in 1918, he had to be both mother and father to his three-year-olds, which suited him fine, although he lived much like a hermit. Before they attended school, he hired Mrs. Victoria Aguilar to stay with them while he was at the mine. After work, he'd fix their supper and play with them before bedtime. They never went to bed without saying their prayers and hearing a story from Pete. All of the usual

household chores had to be done by Pete after his daughters slept. As they grew older, they assisted with household chores.

Once in school, the routine changed a little; after supper, they would do the dishes together and then struggle through their homework with Pete's help. The day still ended with a bedtime prayer and story about the old days when he was a boy in Yugoslavia.

Pete hadn't wanted his girls to feel disadvantaged because they didn't have a mother. Many nights he baked cookies for the PTA fundraisers or studied the Montgomery Ward catalog so he would know what other little girls were wearing before he shopped for his daughters. He attended school and church events. No one had a discouraging word to say about Pete, even when after Sunday Mass, he used the day of rest to wash clothes. Everyone admired his tireless energy and devotion to his girls. Many a mother would have loved to have her daughter marry him, and some of the girls' maiden teachers thought he would make a good catch. But Pete never noticed. He was just too busy.

Pete missed some of that rat race now and tried to find things to fill his time after mine shifts and during holidays. "Who's gonna eat those squirrels?" Pete teased Jozef.

"Not me! Gran'pa; you will."

"So that's what you think? You think I'm gonna make a squirrel stew?"

"You used to, Mama says. She says you used to have squirrel stew a lot."

"I think she's been telling stretchers." Pete grinned at the boy. "Sure, we probably had squirrel stew once in a while." There hadn't been much time for Pete to go hunting. "Go ask your mother, and we'll go."

Pete ambled to his pickup and took his .22-caliber rifle off the rack in the back window. He put on his old jacket and filled the pockets with bullets.

Jozef was waiting for him. "She said it's okay, but not to be gone too long."

They hiked the Old Pass that was now paved. The trees and scrub oaks grew thicker and larger as the winding road ascended. They were almost to the lip of the fourth switch-back when they heard the rustling of dry leaves and spotted a squirrel scratching for fallen acorns.

“Look, Gran’pa.”

“Shhhh!” Pete was busy loading the rifle.

The squirrel skittered up the bank. Pete and Jozef followed as closely as possible. At the top of the bank, the squirrel skittered up the westerly side of a ponderosa tree. Catching sight of the hunters, it zipped to the opposite side and up the trunk of the ponderosa. Pete and Jozef circled around the tree. The squirrel spotted them and flattened itself against the tree trunk, trying to fade into the bark.

“Can I shoot, Gran’pa?” Jozef whispered.

Pete hadn’t counted on this. He quickly thought it over: A .22-rifle is pretty low caliber. It’s a good one for a boy to learn to shoot. Hesitantly, he nodded yes. Without talking, he helped Jozef position the rifle against his shoulder and tried to direct the boy’s aim.

“Can you see him in the sight?” he whispered to the boy. “All right, now just squeeze the trigger, real slow.”

Ka-boom!

Jozef flew back against his grandfather and the shot hit wildly about two feet above its mark. The squirrel bolted, scurried across a branch, and leapt onto the slick pine needles of the next tree. It slid and grappled for another branch. Recovering its balance, it hopped to a third tree, scurried across the treetops, and disappeared.

Sticks, leaves, feathers, and other debris fell to the ground. Jozef’s wild shot had hit the squirrel’s nest.

“Gran’pa, did you see that?” Jozef was trying to regain his balance.

“Sure did. Those squirrels are hard to catch, and I guess we need to take you target practicing. Don’t you think?”

Jozef grinned. “I guess so. But did you see, did you see? He flew like a bird.”

“Some do fly. Hey, where you going?”

Jozef dashed under the tree. "Look, Gran'pa. See this. It's a leather pouch; it fell from the squirrel's nest."

Pete joined the boy under the tree to inspect the old leather mail pouch.

"It says 'U.S. Mail' on it, Gran'pa. Do you think we can open it?"

Pete thought a second. "I think we're supposed to return it to the post office."

"But, Gran'pa, it might not have mail in it; it might be empty; or maybe somebody hid a treasure map in it and hid it in the woods."

"Well, I guess we can open it," Pete said, chuckling at the boy's enthusiasm. "But, if there's mail, we better take it to the post office tomorrow."

"Okay, maybe they'll give us a reward. It's so old."

Pete allowed Jozef to open the pouch. The pouch's brass latch and rivets were tarnished, but its leather parts were intact. Jozef extracted a small bundle of letters, tied together with a piece of string, still in perfect shape. The leather pouch had protected them.

"Gran'pa, here's one addressed to you, dated 1920."

Pete glanced at the letter and noticed that, indeed, it was addressed to him. Suddenly, Pete remembered a letter he had written many years ago. This letter found in the mail pouch was an answer to the letter he had written some thirty years ago, a letter he had practically forgotten until today. He fondly remembered the time when he sought a mail-order bride and the letter he wrote so long ago. He recalled the struggle to write in English and what he had proposed:

May, 24, 1920

Dear Miss Isabel Radosevich,

I see your photograph in the Larimer Match-Making Company Catalogue. Please, to marry me. I work in Gardiner mine. I can pick and shovel good as any man. I work slow and don't get hurt. My luck is good in mine. Not so good for wife. Lena get sick and die with influenza.

Mail-Order Baba

She give me butiful girls, Rose and Belle ~ twins ~ real purty and smart. You will be there mother. They are 3 years. I am good man. Just drink wine. No whiskey. Go to Mass on Sundays. I no good looking and no smart. I go school three years before I work in mine. My father bring family from Leskovac to America. I was little boy. I will take good care of you.

Your friend,
Pete Durocavich

After mailing the letter, he had waited. He remembered going to the post office every day after three weeks, hoping to hear from Isabel. After six months had passed, he gave up hope.

Now, here was a reply. He thought: Surely, she didn't accept my proposal. I must have appeared very ignorant; I knew so little about English. He stuffed the letter into his pocket.

"Aren't you gonna read it? It has your name on it. You don't have to take it to the post office."

"Not now, Jozef, not now. Come on, we'd better get home before your mother sends out a search party."

When they arrived back at the house, Rose and Belle were busy setting out a buffet of Christmas dinner leftovers. Everyone clamored around as if they hadn't eaten for days.

"Wait, wait, the blessing first."

After Pete led the blessing, everybody's attention turned to the food. Rose joked, "Hey, you mighty hunters, how come you're not eating squirrel?"

"We saw one."

"Where is it?"

"Dunno, I missed."

"You let Jozef shoot?"

"I was careful. But he needs target practice."

"When can we go, Gran'pa?"

"Who said you could go?"

Mail-Order Baba

"It'll be all right, Rose. Maybe next weekend."

Jozef smiled. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself. "And guess what, we didn't get a squirrel, but we found a mail pouch, and Gran'pa got a letter."

"A letter? What you talking about? There's no mail on Christmas, is there?" Everyone talked at once.

"Hold yer horses!" Pete interrupted. "Let Jozef tell the story."

Jozef excitedly told of the climb up the bank where the squirrel was spotted and how the squirrel scampered up the trunk of the ponderosa toward its nest and then scurried across the treetops after he shot, hitting its nest, causing the pouch to fall.

"A letter?" George asked, "Aren't you going to open it?"

"Aaaaah, not now."

After much coaxing, Pete reluctantly took the letter from his pocket and read it aloud to everyone:

June 22, 1920

Dear Mr. Pete Durocavich,

Thank you for your proposal. I am pleased to consent to be your wife. It is our good fortune that my father, Sava Radosevich, is from Lesco-vac and knows your father's family. He has consented to your offer. I will travel to Gardiner, where we shall marry. Please send the money for my trip, and, also, the money for the Larimer Match-Making Service. The service cost ten dollars. I think you know the train fare to Gardiner.

Your friend,

Miss Isabel Radosevich

Everyone broke into spontaneous sniggers, even Pete.

"Cripes! Gran'pa, if that letter woulda come years ago, I'd have a baba now!" Boisterous laughter erupted at Jozef's joke.

Then Belle turned serious. "Were you sincere, Papa? Or just too much wine when you wrote her?"

"I'd given it a lot of thought. You girls needed a mama."

"How'd you come to know her?"

"Saw her picture in the Larimer Match-Making catalog."

"Really?"

"A mail-order bride?"

"Lotta boys married that way. Some sent back to the old country asking for a bride. It was easier this way." Pete lowered his voice as he explained. "In them days in the coal camps, there weren't too many girls old enough to marry. And she was very pretty and had kind eyes. I wisht I woulda got her letter then. I needed help with you girls, but it worked out, I guess." Pete's voice trailed off sadly and a hush fogged over the table. Everybody was silent, like after a blessing when no one is sure what to say or do next. . . .

George broke the hush. "Write to her now, Pete."

"Yeah, Gran'pa, write to her. We could have a baba."

The grandchildren begged and badgered in unison, "Please write, please write, please write. Pretty ple-e-ease with sugar."

"What you got to lose, Papa?" Rose added.

Pete looked at his family, "Aaaaw, she's probably someone else's bride by now."

"Or widow," George quipped.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," Belle said, giggling.

After supper, when the dishes were washed, food put away, and the grandchildren were playing with Christmas toys, Rose and Belle sat with Pete at the kitchen table and composed a much more lucid letter than his original to Isabel:

December 25, 1950

Dear Miss Isabel Radosevich,

On June 22, 1920, you accepted a proposal to be my wife. If you are so inclined, I hope you will again consider my proposal. You see, a

Mail-Order Baba

strange thing happened to your letter. Somehow, it ended up in a squirrel's nest on the top of a tree. Today, I was hunting squirrels with my grandson, Jozef, and he accidentally shot the nest. An old mail pouch, with mail from 1920, fell out. Your letter was in it. I know this is crazy, but it's the truth, so help me God. I have the letter and the pouch. I hope you will come. Rose and Belle are married. They are helping me write this letter. They have a bunch of smart boys and girls, who are hoping you will be their Baba.

Your friend,
Pete Durocavich

The next day, Pete and Jozef delivered the mail pouch with the 1920 letters to the post office. Postmistress Rose Giganti was perplexed, wondering how the mail pouch and letters landed in the squirrel's nest.

"Dunno," Pete shrugged, "mostly squirrels climb the trees to the nests."

"A squirrel put the pouch there?" Rose quipped sarcastically.

"What else?"

"A crow."

"Haah! Where'd the crow get the pouch?"

"Same place the squirrel got it." Rose raised her eyebrows, admitting she had no better answer, although she promised to deliver the pouch's letters to any of the persons still living, or to their relatives. Even though the Gardiner coal camp had closed in 1941 and forwarding addresses had expired, she had tucked them away in boxes just in case she had need of them.

Always looking for something to do, Pete offered to help, but Rose declined the offer, something about the official business of handling U.S. mail. "Well, I've got business. I'm answering the letter sent to me in 1920," Pete quipped. "Make it Registered Mail."

Mail-Order Baba

“Good idea. Costs more, but maybe we won’t lose it this time.”

Pete mailed the registered letter to Isabel’s Red Lodge, Montana, address. Isabel no longer lived there. In 1921, she had married a Decker miner, who was killed in an accident in the 1940s. From Decker, she moved to Sheridan, Wyoming, and later, to Denver, where she lived with her bachelor sons. From Christmas 1950 to the following November, Pete’s letter crept slowly and deliberately to Red Lodge, Decker, and then Sheridan. By some miracle of post office alchemy or divine intervention, the letter reached Isabel in Denver just before Thanksgiving 1951. She read it and sent Pete a telegram:

F NOV 30 =

RATON NEW MEX =

PETE DUROCAVICH =

WILL ARRIVE ON SUPER CHIEF IN RATON

DECEMBER 20 ARRANGE FOR WEDDING

BEFORE CHRISTMAS =

ISABEL

Making Do on Johnson Mesa

“Ya! Miss Dundee. Ya! Miss Dalhart.” Brandon clucked and coaxed the team of swaybacks, flapping the reins with one hand and popping a quirt above their rumps in the bright, cool, crisp morning air. Under a turquoise sky, the buckboard tottered over the rocky trail, winding away from the corral. Brandon ceased coaxing. The mares pulled the buckboard to the beat of their own drum, ambling leisurely on the trail to the grassy woods that followed the mesa’s dips and swells to the brink of the horizon.

The trail dipped through a ravine on the edge of the rim-rocks, leading into the trees and bushes where Brandon selected thickets for thinning. On this bright morning, he thinned out a bramble of juniper and piñon trees. He leveled the dead standing trees and chopped down the trees weakened by blight and insects or dwarfed by lack of sunlight. Trimming their branches, he hacked them into logs three feet long and piled them onto the buckboard, keeping some branches for kindling and braces for log piles.

He loaded the buckboard lightly. As cow ponies, Miss Dundee and Miss Dalhart had been cut out to cull cows, and lugging logs was never one of their favorite chores. They made five successive trips up and down the slope of the mesa until the logs were hauled and piled beside the corral. Brandon left the last haul in the buckboard. After unhitching the mares and putting them to pasture, he quit for the day and went into the house, where Dorcas had a hefty meal of venison waiting from last winter’s hunt and potatoes and green beans from the garden. Afterward, they sat on the

porch, smoking, sipping coffee, and watching the turquoise sky slowly dim pink-into-gray as stars seeped into view.

The next day, Brandon loaded his blue 1947 International Harvester with as many logs as the pickup would hold without bursting the springs. The drive to Raton was slow on State Road 72 with the pickup's rear end bogged down and the tires almost rubbing up against the inside of the fenders from the weight of the logs. Once in Raton, he drove up and down the neighborhoods, tailed by a frisky cavvy of boys yelping his arrival, "The wood-man! The wood-man!"

Although he did not look at the boys, he relished their adulation and didn't seem to mind the label. "Once called a durned old mule," Brandon reminded himself, "when I wouldn't climb a windmill on the T.O. when it needed repair. When it fell, with some boys on her, well, I was glad to be a healthy old mule." Before he married Dorcas, he had worked on the T.O. Ranch, saving his money until he could own a spread. After Dorcas became his wife, they built a wood frame house on the Johnson Mesa spread, where they lived for more than fifty years. Now he was living off the fat of the land, leasing the spread to the Berry brothers and selling wood to make pocket money.

As he cruised up and down the streets, the boys vied for his logs by pleading with their mothers to come out and order half a cord. Mothers bought the wood as a favor to him. Coal was king in Raton. Wood was hardly ever burned for heating or cooking. Folks burned logs for the sweet aroma of cottonwood, piñon, or juniper in their stoves, particularly on brisk fall days. The cavvy of boys loved to watch Brandon work.

When a mother came out, Brandon stopped the pickup, thrust his head out the open window, and asked politely, with a glint in his eyes: "Howdy, ma'm. Care for some wood today?" Always formal and polite, he tipped the brim of his hat.

"How much?" She asked, although she knew the answer.

"Whatever you kin afford."

She nodded, pointed to where the logs were to be piled and walked back into the house. He drove to the end of the block, turned, and returned down the alley to the backyard. Holding the pickup's door ajar and peering backward, he cautiously reversed the pickup into the backyard. As though stepping down from a buckboard, he slid gingerly off the front seat, gently closed the door, and moseyed to the rear of the pickup. He flicked a hand, waving at the admiring boys.

While he prepared to unload the logs, the cavy of boys corralled him, thrilled to watch a real cowboy ply his trade. He was the real McCoy, a rootin' tootin' buckaroo, not a Hollywood drugstore dandy. They admired his outfit: a rumpled Stetson, scuffed Tony Lama boots, and bleached Levis girded by a leather belt with a Mexican silver buckle. He jerked the rumpled Stetson over his forehead and yanked leather gloves from beneath his belt. One at a time, he splayed a hand, pulled on a glove, and rubbed the palm, pumping and stretching his fingers as he tucked the tight, soft lamb leather over each hand.

He unhitched the pickup's tailgate and started unloading the logs. Ambling deliberately, he layered the logs evenly in two rows near the house. There was weariness in his movements as if he had stacked logs for more ambitious projects—building a fence around the T.O., raising a railroad trestle, or setting props in a mine—and this project was without challenge. Yet the two rows were stacked with pride, each neat row propped in place by long skinny branches.

When finished, he stopped to rest, removed the Stetson and wiped the sweat from his brow with a huge blue and white bandana tied around his neck. Sitting on the log pile, he took a Bull Durham tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket and rolled a cigarette, lightly licking the paper. He struck a match across the sole of a boot, lit the cigarette, and spit on the match, dousing it. Loosely grasping the tiny cigarette between his index finger and thumb, he puffed leisurely. Succoring each puff, he waited for the mother to bring his pay.

Coming out of the house, the mother didn't bother to inspect his work because she knew the logs would be neatly stacked. She handed him nickels and dimes wrapped in two crumpled dollar bills, which he pocketed without counting. "May have to cure 'em a bit," he noted about the green logs. She nodded and turned to leave. Thanking her for the business, he puffed the last of the cigarette, snuffed it out on the heel of his boot, and left. The cavvy of boys trailed him, romping behind the pickup at a safe distance.

On occasion, Dorcas accompanied him to town to sell eggs gathered from her chickens. She wasn't as generous as Brandon, setting a price for the eggs, three-cents-a-piece for regular size and four-cents-a-piece for larger sizes. This was one cent lower than eggs at the grocery store, and her eggs were usually fresher. They were considered the tastiest in the region, a reputation earned through careful management. She was fastidious with the chickens, cleaning the coop and henhouse weekly so the hens wouldn't eat their own droppings. She purchased only the best feed and kept track of each hen's productivity. As the productivity declined, she purchased new chicks and made excellent holiday meals with the older hens.

In the summers, she tended a garden. This spring, she had decided on a less ambitious garden. In place of her usual verdant rows of onions, cabbage, snap beans, tomatoes, turnips, carrots, cucumbers, beets, radishes, and lettuce, this spring she had planted a smattering of each vegetable because she didn't plan to preserve them. She kept a few man-o'-war praying mantises in the garden to fend off grasshoppers and other pesky bugs and a bullsnake to take care of the moles that nibbled at the roots of the tender plants. Bugs and moles kept their distance or suffered the consequences. Not so for one rotund rabbit.

One bright day, Dorcas complained: "Brandon! There's a pig of a big rabbit that's eating my onions and lettuce and everything else. They're barely sprouting, and he gobbles 'em."

"Have you seen the big rabbit?"

"No. He comes out at night."

"Then how do you know he's so-o-o-o big?"

"Because only a rabbit so-o-o-o big could eat so much. Catch him, and I'll make a bi-i-g stew."

"What we need is a good coyote."

"Whatever for? He'd eat the rabbit and our chickens, too."

"Haah, not if'n he was a *good* coyote! B'sides, I cain't shoot that rag-butt in the dark."

"You cain't shoot it in the light!"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Hush now, I'm serious. We need to do something about that rabbit."

They sat at the kitchen table in serene puzzlement, pondering the challenge. Insects and moles, Dorcas could handle, but the rabbit was more irksome. Slowly, a fuzzy glow of light glimmered over Dorcas's face. "Land sakes," she said, her eye twinkling. She smacked Brandon on the shoulder. "Let's make a tar baby to catch that blamed rabbit!"

"Huh?" Brandon hadn't seen the light.

"Don't you remember the story about Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby? Well, it seems that Brer Fox and Brer Bear were always trying to catch Brer Rabbit. Brer Fox was smart. Brer Bear needed coaching." Dorcas told the parts of the Uncle Remus tale she remembered, which didn't amount to much. It had been a while since she taught the story to the first and second graders in Center School.

"Then what happened?"

"I dunno know, it's been a while," she said, sighing. "But the rabbit got caught, I remember." She sighed again, resigned to the fact they had no tar.

"It's a good idee," Brandon said, "an' we don't need no tar. Tomorrow, I'll chop down some pinyons. We'll use the pitch from the trees to catch that blamed rabbit. You'll see, pitch is gooey. Once you get it on your hands, you gotta wipe them clean with kerosene."

"I knew we'd see the light, putting our heads together." Dorcas beamed with pleasure.

The next morning, Brandon took the buckboard and mares down the trail into the woods and chopped down some piñon trees. They were abundant with pitch. The fresh pitch was sticky and gooey like gum. Meanwhile back at the ranch, Dorcas found a worn pair of Brandon's white cotton socks with holes in the toes and heel. She cut, stitched, and sewed a bonnet, two booties, and a diaper from the tattered socks.

When Brandon returned with the trees, he peeled off their bark, scraped off the pitch, and rolled it into a big ball. With the pitch, he shaped a little doll with pudgy arms and legs. Dorcas came to the backyard and dressed the doll, pinning on its diaper with a safety pin. That afternoon, she put the doll in her garden and gave it a name:

"Let's call her Trementina."

"Where in tarnation did you get that name?"

"Why, Brandon, sometimes I swear, you don't know sic'em. Trementina is what Mexicans call turpentine, made outta pine pitch."

"Oh, sure, I knowed that," which is what he used to say whenever he didn't know something.

That night after dark, before the moon had risen to brighten the sky, a fat-headed jackrabbit slithered slyly into the garden on his stomach. He bumped his portly nose into Trementina and stuck to the doll.

"Zounds! My nose's stuck. Who are you?"

No answer from Trementina.

"Tell me who you are, or I'll kick you with my foot!"

No answer.

Pow! Jack Rabbit kicked her. His front foot stuck. He tried to pull his foot loose, but as he dragged his foot backward, she stuck to him and wouldn't let go.

"Who are you? I'll kick you with my other foot if you won't tell me!"

Still no answer from Trementina.

Pow! Jack Rabbit kicked her with his other foot. It stuck, too. Now both front feet were stuck. Jack Rabbit yelped: "I still got two feet! Tell me who you are, or I'll kick you with

them!" It was strenuous for him to holler. His nose and front feet were stuck to Trementina.

Still no answer.

Pow! Jack Rabbit kicked with his bulky back leg. It stuck. Pow! He kicked her with the second back leg. It stuck. Now the corpulent jackrabbit was completely stuck to Trementina. He couldn't move. . . . The next morning, Dorcas found Jack Rabbit cold and shivering, stuck to Trementina. She grasped him by the scruff of the neck and rushed into the kitchen:

"Brandon, we got him! He's fat as a pig."

"Boy, howdy! He is a porker!"

"He outta be, eating our vittles. He'll make good stew. Chop off his head. I'll get the pot boiling."

Brandon took Jack Rabbit to the woodshed, where he kept a sharp ax. He laid Jack Rabbit, still stuck to Trementina, on a tree stump.

"Pl-e-a-s-ee, o-o-oh, please chop my head off." Jack Rabbit talked through the side of his mouth in a high-pitched, shrill tremor.

"Fer a porker, ya shore do talk funny."

"Please chop off my head, right away!"

"Why ya'all fired-up to have your head chopped off?"

"Weeeell," Jack Rabbit whined, "most cowboys just throw a poor rabbit into the boiling water, whilst he's still alive!"

"Ouch! That smarts!"

"You bet! It hurts to be boiled alive," Jack Rabbit whimpered. "So please, please chop off my head first. That way, I won't feel nuthin'."

While Jack Rabbit whined and moaned, begging to have his head chopped off, Dorcas hollered from the back door:

"Brandon, I just recalled how the real story ends. Don't listen to a word he says! He'll trick you."

"Huh? This rag-butt ain't fooling me none."

"Boo-hoo-boo-hoo." Jack Rabbit started to cry. "Make a stew out of me! Use my fur for gloves! Do whatever you please, but chop off my head first."

"Durn your hide. I could skin you alive! You ate our fresh vittles. We have no greens to eat. Quit yer bawlin'!"

"I'm sorry, but don't boil me alive."

"Oh, shush!" Brandon scoffed as he carried Jack Rabbit back into the kitchen, where Dorcas was boiling water to make a stew.

"Please, oh, please don't boil me alive. Cut off my head first," Jack Rabbit persisted in whimpering and begging.

The more Jack Rabbit protested and pleaded, the angrier Brandon became. He was determined to boil Jack Rabbit alive and held him aloft by the ears, high above the pot waiting for the water to bubble and steam. When the water started to boil, Brandon pitched Jack Rabbit toward the pot. Down . . . down . . . down, Trementina and Jack Rabbit plunged toward the steaming pot of boiling water. As they fell through the thick hot steam rising from the top of the pot, Trementina's pitch softened. Jack Rabbit wiggled loose—first his nose, then one foot, two, three, four peeled away from the gooey pitch just as he tumbled by the rim of the pot. He extended his legs in a spread eagle and landed on the rim of the pot with all four paws.

"Yikes! Pot's hot!" He yipped as he sprang away from the pot's rim, landed on all fours on the kitchen floor, and scampered out the door.

Dorcas and Brandon were baffled by this sudden turn of events. One moment Jack Rabbit was stuck to Trementina and headed toward a stew, and the next, he was melted loose and headed for freedom through the back door. Flabbergasted, they stared at each other for a long time without speaking. Finally, Brandon lamented: "Goes to show, a rabbit ain't dead till it's skinned."

"I told you not to listen to him. That's what happened in the real story."

"Blame it all, you never did say how the real story ends."

"Can't cry over spilt milk." Dorcas wasn't one to lament too much. "We got to take the bad with the good."

"Not much good comes after a rabbit's rolled his tail." Brandon muttered, shaking his head in disappointment.

Making Do on Johnson Mesa

“Yeah, they is! Looka the pot, full of turpentine. That comes from boiling pitch. We’ll use it to coat the shingles on the roof and chicken shed.” Dorcas stood over the simmering pot and stirred the thick turpentine with a wooden spoon. “Run, get a bucket and brush. We got work to do.”

Brother Bill's Bait Bites Back

When it comes to catching bullheads, Brother Bill takes a lackadaisical attitude, but he's all business. I mean he puts his heart and soul into her, but he acts like he don't give a care. The trick is to fool the bulls into thinking you don't give a hoot. You bait with most anything that looks like fish food, anything from a piece of rubber tubing to a green bean. Doesn't matter much. 'Course, a grub or grasshopper works pretty good, too.

Make sure you got the bait hooked real well, nip-and-tuck, then cast your line good and deep to the darkest part of the muddy bottom. Then you make a ruckus, talking real loud, how you don't like to catch bulls and the only reason you're fishing is to get away from the Missus. You fool them old bulls into thinking you don't care.

The hooting and hollering is just for show so the bulls will come around. Bulls are loners, but they don't care to be shunned. If'n they b'lieve you're not paying attention to 'em, they'll come around and follow your line down into the muddy bottom. Just for spite, they'll take your bait no matter what it is, two-by-four or horny toad. Watch your bob. It'll dip a couple of times and plunge into its own ripples. Bull's hooked.

Now, small-mouth bass, they're feisty. You can't tarry and pretend you don't care to catch them. They got more self-respect. Took Brother Bill a while to figure them out. After the Vermejo Project was completed, Lake 13 was stocked with small-mouths. There was plenty in the lake, but Brother Bill couldn't catch any. I figured the lake's number "13" had

something to do with the bad luck, but Brother Bill wouldn't let superstition stop him.

Trouble is, he was treating the small-mouths like he treated bulls, pretending to snub them, but they don't have any respect for a fisherman without a fight. They're tough predators and expect to be hunted. Brother Bill got to thinking he'd outsmart them jaw-jutted critters with the perfect jigger, "Herman the Worm," a pretty plastic worm.

You don't need to have real food for small-mouths, just have to make the bait look like real critters, worth the trouble of locking horns. Brother Bill looped two Herman jiggers onto a long leader, pitched the line and jerk-baited it, putting them two Hermans in a ritual love dance. Down they went into the depths of Lake 13. He wouldn't let them stop moving, jerking and swaying them like they was two salamanders chasing each other for some lovemaking.

Quick as lightning, two small-mouths was in hot pursuit of them jiggers. They couldn't stand still while them jiggers jitterbugged like they was about to mate—Glomp! Glomp! They glommed onto those jiggers and tugged something fierce, putting a horseshoe arch in the rod. Brother Bill all along feeding slack whilst the line whizzed through the rod's rings. He steered them away from the algae and roots near a deadhead. They twisted, turned, shattered the surface and shot skyward, gleaming in the sun and disappearin', diving down into the deep.

That was some dance, them two small-mouths moving in perfect step and the rod arching and line a'stretching. Took a while but they tired and gave up the fight. He reeled them to shore ever so slow so as not to snap the line, flopping them into the net, which wasn't easy by a long shot. Then the ornery critters put up another fight when he tried to run the stringer through their gills. They just weren't ready to give up the ghost, but they're good eating and worth the fight.

The truth is, I could never tell when Bill was stretching a yarn, such as the time he liked to died fishing for rainbows. He lives in Sugarite close to Lake Maloya. To hear him tell

it, he always gets his limit of rainbows outta that lake, even when they aren't biting. Other fellows fished all day and couldn't get a bite. He'd come home with a creel full of rainbows. Says the secret's in worms. He grows 'em fat and long in a Number 3 washtub buried in the backyard that's full of dirt, dry grass, and coffee grounds mixed in with chili and turpentine. When the worms are good and fat and plenty long, they're ready for fishing.

Now Brother Bill, when he sees the worms are ready, he puts some of them fat, wiggly critters in his mouth. 'Course, worms in your mouth would make most men sicker 'an a dog. That's why the night before angling, Brother Bill chews tobacco all evening to build up a coating to protect his mouth. His missus, Floreen, can't abide by the smell of his tobacco breath so he sleeps on the couch that night.

Bright and early the next morning, he goes to his worm farm and picks the juiciest ones, puts them in his mouth, and holds them there all the way to the lake. His cheeks are bulging with fat, crawly critters. At the lake, he hooks a couple of them worms, and before you can say *gotcha*, he has a rainbow or two in his creel.

It's all in what Brother Bill feeds 'em, warm worms raised on coffee grounds, chili, and turpentine. Last Memorial Day, Brother Bill followed his usual practice, chewing tobacco and rising early, putting fat worms in his mouth, and leaving to the lake. He was gone a long time and Floreen didn't think too much of it till the sun was setting, and Brother Bill hadn't come home in time for supper with his usual catch.

About seven in the evening, she heard Brother Bill grouching about the privy. After a spell, when he don't come into the house, she goes to see what he was a'doing. Brother Bill wasn't doing nothing. Floreen reckoned something was wrong when he just sat there in the privy without his fishing rod or stringer of fish. He bear-hugged himself and trembled like the dickens, shaking and fretting, his teeth chattering:

"Br~br~br~br~br."

"Bill, what's wrong?" Floreen was worried sick.

Bill was delirious and didn't know where he was. He just kept shaking and fretting in a cold sweat, his teeth chattering, "br~br~br~br~br."

You'd thought he had the DTS, shaking like a cold turkey drunk. But he never ever nipped. He was a teetotaler. Floreen took Bill into the house and put him in bed. She sent me for Doc Fuller. I spotted Doc Fuller's car in front of Miss Catherine McLaughlin's place. She was a new teacher in the camp. In fact, she was the first teacher we ever had. Good thing Doc and Mrs. Fuller was making the rounds to welcome her to Sugarite.

I traipsed to the front door and knocked. Miss McLaughlin answered. I told her Doc was needed. Right away, he came out, got his black leather bag from the car and came over and found Bill in bed under a pile of covers still sweating and fretting, his teeth chattering, "br~br~br~br~br."

Doc looked him over. "Except for a fever and the shakes, I don't see anything wrong. Where's Bill been?"

"Fishing. Up to Lake Maloya."

"Last time I saw a man shaking like Bill was several years ago." Doc scratched his head and rubbed his brow, then put his hand on his chin, rubbed it like he had an itchy beard, even though he was clean shaved, except for a midget moustache. "Shorty Bovee was gathering bricks around the coke ovens in Koehler. Got bit by a rattlesnake."

"Rattlers?" Floreen held her arms akimbo. "There's no rattlers up at Lake Maloya."

Brother Bill stopped trembling and chattering long enough to shake his head and agree with Floreen, meaning he didn't see any rattlers whilst he was at Maloya.

"I know." Doc didn't argue. "I don't recollect hearing of any at Maloya, either." Doc stayed rubbing his chin. Lost in thought, he mumbled to himself, "What I can't figure is—well, Bill's shaking like he's been bit by a snake, although I can't see where he's been bit."

Floreen and I just stood staring at Brother Bill, watching him chatter and shake. We was helpless. Doc didn't seem much better, but he kept muttering to himself.

"Treated Shorty for snake bite. He sweat out the venom. Guess we can do the same with Bill." Doc's eyes lit up. He stopped rubbing his chin and gave orders.

"Here's what I want you to do, Floreen. Fix him two hot toddies with double shots of whiskey. Make him drink both of them, one right after the other. Then bury him under the covers, head-to-toe. We want him to work up a big sweat. Don't let him get cold. I'll come around in the morning. Say a prayer, hope he'll be okay."

After Doc left, Floreen did just what he ordered, mixing two hot toddies with double shots of Jack Daniels. In two swigs, Brother Bill tilted them down. Then she tucked him in bed under a heap of blankets. . . .

Next day when Doc came by, Brother Bill was sitting in bed, a mite puny an' pale, but smiling an' feeling fine.

"You look good. How you feeling?"

"Just fine, Doc. You kilt off the bug that bit me."

"Wasn't a bug. Musta been a snake bit you."

"You reckon? How's that, with no snakes at Maloya?"

"Well, Bill, you had the shakes and a cold sweat, just like when Shorty Bovee got bit by a rattler. Treated you for snake bite, and here you are, feeling fine, considering."

We wanted to believe Doc, but his was a hard pill to swallow. Never in the history of Sugarite had anyone ever seen or heard of rattlers living anywhere near Lake Maloya. B'sides, Brother Bill couldn't recall anythin' biting him, no bug or snake. Doc was no ordinary sawbones. He even talked like he didn't believe what he was saying. We just set there in the bedroom for a while, flabbergasted 'bout the situation, glad that Brother Bill was better and wonderin' how a snake coulda bit him.

After a long, quiet spell, Brother Bill commenced to jabbering and blabbering, and we thought for certain he'd turned for the worse, the way he blabbered on and on about them worms of his, an' how he got careless. Then he jumped outta bed and motioned for his shirt and pants. He wanted to go see his worm bed. He appeared fit as a fiddle, so Doc didn't object. Soon's Bill dressed and put on his shoes,

Brother Bill's Bait Bites Back

we followed him outside to the worm bed, where he stood lookin' it over and babbling.

“Ya know, they’s a chance, just a chance mind ya, maybe it weren’t a bug bit me. Could be a baby rattler got in them worms of mine. One of them worms was mighty fat. Wiggled a lot, too, an’ pricked my finger when I was a-hooking her for bait.”

Don't Crowd Me, Mister

Two old cowboys rode back to the CS bunkhouse after a long, hot day rounding up stray calves.

TJ Nalda complained: "Dat burn gnats! Them pests been flyin' about my neck all day."

"Patience, amigo," Ned Chavez replied calmly.

Smack! TJ slapped his neck, swatting at the gnat biting him. "Pesky critters got no use, 'cept to pester me."

"What would them barn swallows eat, weren't for the gnats?" Ned pointed to the swallows that were swooping into a swarm of gnats, zigzagging every which way, gobbling gnats as they flew.

"They'd eat me."

"Naw, you're too big. The swallows would starve without gnats to eat."

"No, they wouldn't. They'd find plenty of mosquitoes."

"Well, maybe. Bats eat mosquitoes. What'll bats eat, if'n the swallows eat the mosquitoes?"

Ned's horse Apache kicked a tumbleweed and a coiled rattler warned, "chi-chi-chi-chi-chi-chi." Apache reared and kicked her forelegs high. Ned leaned into her mane and stroked the muscles of her graceful neck, speaking in soft, soothing tones, "Whoa girl, whoa, easy girl." Apache dropped her forelegs to the grass, darted ten yards, and halted, waiting for TJ to catch up. Ned stroked her neck again, praising her, "Good girl, you did good. Didn't throw me, or nothin', good girl."

"Ha! Neither of you's Injuns, skittering like a bat outta hell." When TJ caught up to Ned and the frightened filly, he was grinning from ear to ear, enjoying the excitement

of the moment. He shoved his hat back, exposing a pale white forehead. "That's grit for you, the way you and Apache bolted! Look like you and Apache was scairt."

"We wasn't scairt, just careful. Com'on, let's go!" Ned spurred his horse gently.

"I reckon the Good Lord made that tumbleweed to give the rattler shade."

"Truth is," Ned corrected TJ, "the Good Lord make tumbleweeds so's we could tell which direction the wind's blowing."

"Ha! They're as worthless as gnats. You just cain't admit it, but you was scairt. Come on now, Ned, admit it, you was scairt."

"TJ, you're as pesky as them gnats, I swear. 'Course I was scairt, amigo. Any fool that ain't afraid of rattlers is a durn ol' mule."

"I reckon I'm scairt of rattlers, too. I'd kill every son-of-one, if'n I could."

"Then what? We'd be overrun by mice, an' rats, an' other such vermin. That's not too good. B'sides, them rattlers, they're food for buzzards, eagles. What would they eat if'n they wasn't any rattlers?"

"Bull snakes."

"Before you know it, all the animals would starve."

"Boy, howdy! There you go again. Here you 'most got thrown by a rattler—"

"Así es la vida—so is life," said Ned, shrugging his shoulders. "Amigo, we ain't got nothing to do but drive these dogies home and listen to each other, so pay attention to this here old *cuento* my vaquero tío told me."

"Huh, 'quen-toe? Baa-care-oo? T.O.'? There ya go, talkin' Mexican an' you know I cain't understand it."

"Amigo, amigo, I'll tell you a story my buckaroo uncle once told me. It's an old Injun tale."

"That's better."

"Long time ago, when all the animals had been made, they was supposed to respect each other. Rattlesnakes didn't have rattles or fangs. They was called diamondbacks after

the diamond shapes on their backs the Good Lord gave 'em, to hide from the buzzards, eagles, and such."

"Now hold on. If'n they's supposed to respect each other, how they gonna eat?"

"Respect don't have nothing to do with eating. Every critter's gotta eat to live."

"Now you're making horse sense. I could use some vittles."

"Quit in'errupting. Respect don't mean you cain't eat another critter. Look at that hawk, gliding high in the sky, hunting for a mouse or a snake, or any critter that moves. Say he spots a snake moving through the grass, like the one we just saw. That hawk swoops fast as greased lightning, and smack! Snake's deader than a doornail. With one blow, he crushes the rattler's head, takes it in his beak, flies to a shady tree or cactus, and has dinner. The snake don't even know what hit him."

"Still don't seem respectful, killing another critter to eat."

"Amigo, why you suppose we're driving these dogies home? Someday, they'll be somebody's dinner."

"Well, yeah, but we ain't gonna kill 'em to eat 'em."

"Makes no difference who kills them. I'll never get the tale told, if'n you insist on splitting hairs! When my uncle tole the tale, it made lotta sense, about how critters need other critters to live. That's why they eat each other. Look at us, we eat other critters, like them dogies. You just ain't supposed to be mean-spirited about a'killing them."

"Okey-dokey, but that poor snake that gets killed by the hawk. He's none too happy."

"Shoot, TJ, he's no longer a scroungy snake grouching in the dirt. He's now a part of the hawk. He don't know no better. Best to get along with the tale, like my uncle tole me. You'll get it by-and-by." Ned pressed on with the tale: "Like I was saying, the Good Lord made all the critters and gave them one simple rule, respect each other. Now, I know it don't make horse sense to allow critters to eat one another with that rule and all, but the Good Lord ain't a horse. He

musta had a reason we cain't understand so let me get on with the tale and be done with it.

"The snakes didn't have fangs or rattles and the rabbits got carried away, using the snakes as whips. The rabbits whipped up a storm. They whipped the trees, the bushes, the boulders, the trees, the bugs, and itty-bitty critters. At dusk, them diamondbacks was sore. They ached all over from the tip of their tails to the tip of their noses. They was hurting bad, moaning and groaning, 'Dat burn it! That hurts!'

"Schwaso! Schwaso! Schwaso! The more the diamondbacks moaned and groaned, the more the rabbits whipped, working up froth and lather as they cracked those poor snakes at everything in sight."

"Them rag-butts shore liked to flog."

"Yep! Shore seem to enjoy flogging other critters."

"An' each other."

"Yep! Them rabbits whipped so hard, they got plumb tucked out. They lay down to nap. The diamondbacks took their chance to slither away. They crawled all over Creation to find the Good Lord. When they come upon a honeysuckle rose bush, they reckoned they'd found the Good Lord."

"How do you figure?"

"The sun was a-settin' and shined down on that bush, and the bush musta glowed all red and pink and pretty. The diamondbacks figured if'n Moses could talk to the Good Lord in a burning bush, why they could talk to the Good Lord the same way."

"They's jist snakes, fer heaven sakes!"

"Be patient, amigo. Course, they was snakes. They didn't know no better. Anyways, they started praying to the Good Lord, a'standing before the honeysuckle bush: 'Oh, Good Lord, maker of all critters of the heavens and earth, hear our prayer.' They figured a little boot-licking wouldn't hurt none.

"In a big, booming voice, the Good Lord hollered, 'What do you want? Why you bothering me? Don't you see I'm making the world?'

" 'Oh, Great One, we don't mean to bother—'

“Quit whining! Well, what is it?”

“We don’t get no respect from the rabbits. Please give us something to protect ourselves from the rabbits.”

“But I have rules to protect you. You critters are supposed to respect one another.”

“Yes, Great One, we obey your rules. We try to respect the rabbits. They don’t respect us. They use us for play, like we was whips, floggin’ every critter in sight, even each other. It hurts when they do that.”

“Humph! How’s this? They don’t obey?” The Good Lord was so mad he could of swallowed a horned toad backwards: ‘Respect, I tell you! You critters got to learn!’

“Oh, Good Lord, we ain’t the ones. It’s them rabbits. They don’t respect us none.”

“What do you propose?”

“Now the diamondbacks took their chance. ‘Give us some fangs plumb full of poison. When the rabbits don’t respect us, we can bite them, teach them a lesson or two.’

“Haah! They’d die learning. I’m not too keen on poisonous fangs.”

“We need something to keep the rabbits away. Look at us. We’re nothing but a bunch of beat-up, scrawny snakes.”

“I can see that! And, b’sides, you whine too much. Why don’t you just crawl away into the grass? That’s why I gave you them colors on your back. The colors blend with the grass and ground. The rabbits’ll never be able to find you.”

“Sure! Sure! You gave the rabbits quick, nimble legs. They run faster ’an we crawl.”

“By now, you could tell the Good Lord was peeved and wanted to get rid of the scrawny diamondbacks groveling at His feet: ‘If I give you fangs with poison, how do I know you won’t bite anybody you want? And then crawl away, fast-like?’

“The diamondbacks sassed back, feisty-like, ‘Humpf! You don’t trust us.’

“Haa! Haa! I trusted the rabbits, and they don’t obey! Why are you any different?”

“ ‘If’n you won’t give us fangs, chop off their legs, so they can’t run so fast. We can crawl away before they catch us.’

“ ‘Bah! That’s no good. Then the coyotes would catch and eat them. Before long, there’d be no rabbits. In no time flat, the coyotes would starve to death. Then the critters that eat coyotes would starve to death. Before you know it, all the critters would die.’

“ ‘HI-S-S-S-S-S-S-S! HI-S-S-S-S-S-S!’

“The diamondbacks weren’t none too happy. They hissed real loud. That was their way of whooping and yelling. ‘Hi-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s!’ The diamondbacks raised such a ruckus that the Good Lord sneezed twice as loud to shut them up, ‘A-CHOOOOOO!’ His sneeze was full of spit and twisted like a fearsome tornado. Trees and bushes in the surrounding meadow blew over. The scrawny pinyons didn’t have a Chinaman’s chance. The mob of snakes crawled from under the downed trees. They wasn’t hissing no more, beings that the Good Lord was so temperamental. But they was mad. One ornery diamondback shouted at the Good Lord: ‘Even you don’t give us respect. You shoulda warned us, before sneezing. Looka the mess you made!’

“The Good Lord was throwed for a loop when He saw the seven-mile-wide trench that was dug by the sneeze. And nobody ever called Him on his own rules, like that ornery diamondback just did. He got to thinking and come up with an idea. ‘Listen here, you poor excuses for snakes, I’ll give you fangs with poison, but I’m giving you rattles, too. Just like you was wanting a warning before I sneezed, when the rabbits get too close, you are to shake your rattles, so as to give warning: Don’t crowd me mister, or use me to play.’

“ ‘But, but,’ the ornery rattler complained, ‘what if’n the rabbits still grab us to whip and play, like we was whips?’

“ ‘You’re ornery and dumb, ain’t ya!’ The Good Lord was too hot to spit. ‘Look here, if they don’t show you no respect, you can bite them.’

“Quicker than a calf can find its mother, the Good Lord gave them poison fangs and rattles. They crawled back to their holes, happy to crawl on their bellies hunting for mice

and such. As soon as a rabbit saw one of the diamondbacks, the rabbit tried to grab the snake for a whip. The diamondback coiled and rattled, so as to give warning. The rabbit just laughed at the rattling and grabbed the diamondback.

“Wap! The rattler bit the rabbit. He dropped the snake. It crawled away. All the other rabbits, and plenty of other critters, watched that cocky rabbit get weaker and punier till he died. After that, the rabbits, an’ plenty other critters, too, respected the rattlers, out of fear if nothing else.”

“Coming to think of it,” TJ muttered, “I do too.”

Mind Your Mothers

Coal-camp mothers of the Gardiner Elementary School weren't sure whether the new principal Connie Reynolds was incredibly smug or merely dim, or both. One thing was certain. At school, he could be trusted to fix things, even when they weren't broken. Imbued with trendy notions of 'progressive' education, he was determined to endow the blessing of the modern approach on the old-fashioned ways of the teachers and parents of the Gardiner School. Already during his first term, he had managed to withdraw the Gardiner pupils from the Colfax County Spelling Bee.

Opposed to the contest, he believed it fostered excessive competition in children, resulting in one child as gloating winner, the remaining glum losers. The facts did not dissuade Reynolds even when the teachers reported both the winners and losers enjoyed the competition of the bee. It expanded the children's vocabulary while they learned to spell onerous words. "Tut-tut, don't be silly." Like a dog holding a bone, he tenaciously defended his position. "The kiddies can learn to spell by reading good literature, without shame when they misspell."

Nessie Bartholomew served as president of the parent-teacher association and determined to be a one-woman spy to prevent further arbitrary decisions. She didn't particularly enjoy the self-appointed role but her threshold for tolerance was a bit higher than that of other mothers. Raised in Wales, Nessie well remembered how her mother played the same role. "New headmaster comes to school," her mother often complained, "and fiddle-farts about, rearranging this-and-

that, to make a show he's making blimy progress. Comes to naught."

Nessie ran out of patience over the Christmas pageant: "Mr. Reynolds, I'm here to see you about the Christmas pageant."

"Tut-tut, Halloween's just passed, Nessie. No call to worry about Christmas, yet."

"Yes, there is. We've got to get busy making costumes for our younguns, but we can't, least till we know their parts in the pageant."

"Now, now, Nessie. Call me Connie. I'm doing things more modern, more up-to-date, this year. Making costumes is rather old-fashioned, a waste of time. You've got better things to do. I'm ordering some fancy costumes from the Samuel French Company in Chicago."

"We can't afford store-made costumes. Every year, we swap with each other, or mend the ones we have. There's no need—"

"Tut-tut, don't be silly," Reynolds interrupted her, "the school will foot the bill." He stood, walked around his desk, and escorted Nessie to the school door, patting her on the shoulder. "You'll see. The kiddies will sparkle in branspanking new costumes, you'll see. No more gunny sacks and hand-me-downs."

During the next two weeks, Reynolds assigned parts, measured the pupils, and ordered the costumes. By mistake, they were delivered to Gardiner, Montana, rather than New Mexico. In Montana, the postmistress hauled them to the local elementary school where they sat in a storeroom for six weeks when a teacher spotted them. That's when the error was caught. Immediately, they were forwarded to Gardiner (New Mexico) Elementary School and arrived too late, January 3, 1921.

In mid-December, when Mr. Reynolds realized the costumes weren't going to arrive in time for the Christmas pageant, he called Nessie at the company store where she worked:

"This is Mr. Connie Reynolds, the principal at—"

"Yes, certainly, I know who you are."

"The kiddies need your help, and the other mothers, too."

"Oh my, what could be—?"

"The kiddies' costumes I ordered . . . well . . . it appears they'll not arrive in time for the pageant."

"It appears? Whatever do you—"

"Tut-tut, don't blow a gasket. No need for hysterics. The costumes haven't arrived, and it's days before the pageant."

"Goodness, what will you do?"

"Not me. You'll be doing the doing! You'll have to make the costumes for the kiddies, after all. So will the other mothers."

"What? There's hardly time. I told you in early November that—"

"Now, Nessie, you know as well as I, you foreign mothers, why you like to make the costumes."

"I hardly think of England as foreign."

"You're from England?"

"Well, Wales—"

"Tut-tut, no time for small talk. Better get crankin'. Good thing this little foul-up didn't happen in Raton. There I'd be in big trouble. You know American mothers. They're spoiled. Not half as good as you at making things from scraps. Tell the other mothers, too. I'm counting on you." Click, he hung up.

He's dim and smug, Nessie concluded. Angry and frustrated, she couldn't call the other mothers. At the time, families didn't have telephones in their company-owned homes. Instead, she used the mother's telegraph line by telling the mothers across the fence on all four sides of her house, who in turn did the same, spreading the news up and down the rows of houses. Immediately, mothers started refurbishing hand-me-down costumes.

Two weeks before the pageant, music teacher Miss Viola Webster contracted influenza and was admitted to the Gardiner hospital. In the evenings as she recuperated, the elementary teachers visited her for coaching tips on arranging

choral groups and singing practice with the smaller children. Conditions went from bad to worse. Two other teachers contracted influenza, were hospitalized, and replaced by substitute teachers. Prospects for the pageant were low. The school was at the center of the community and the Christmas Pageant was always a highly attended gala. "Christmas 1920 will be no exception," Reynolds smugly surmised, "except for the late start on costume fitting and a few illnesses. Surely that can't hurt much."

The night of the pageant, the school auditorium was packed with men, women, children, friends, and neighbors eager to enjoy an evening of holiday festivities. The pageant opened awkwardly and rolled downhill, deteriorating as the night grew longer. Yet the children waxed intrepidly, strutting and fretting in their appointed roles, forgetting the words and ad-libbing as they sang Christmas carols. To their credit, they acted with the poise of vaudevillians, extemporizing their lines and parts in the grand tradition that the show must go on. And it did. On and on and on it unraveled, with miscues, botched lines, incorrect lyrics, and off-key warblings from the throats of children dressed in ragtag costumes.

When the pageant ended, and the final curtain descended, the mothers applauded loudly and fathers whistled and cheered in support of their children. Afterward, not a single mother spoke to Reynolds about the production. Beyond insincere greetings and nods, they ignored him while bundling their children for the walk home in the cold, dark night. The pageant just wasn't up to their standards. In the following days, not a single mother sent a batch of Christmas goodies to his home. No homemade pies, *potica*, *bizcochitos*, or mincemeat tarts for the Reynoldes' Christmas 1920.

On a frigid January morning in 1921, school started again. The potbelly stoves strained to kill the chill that had accumulated in the classrooms over the holiday. Everything seemed back to normal. Subdued by the long tranquil holiday, pupils worked quietly at their desks while teachers tutored others.

There were no apparent signs that a revolution was brewing among the mothers, but D-Day was planned for the first school board meeting of the year in the Colfax County Courthouse in Raton, second week of January.

To a stranger, the makings of a revolt were apparent. Immediately following the botched Christmas pageant, the mothers soundly shunned Reynolds. Now in January, the school board meeting was packed with mothers and fathers from Gardiner. Normally, school board meetings were staid, humdrum events with few parents in attendance. Parents trusted their principals and teachers and rarely attended. Not this January evening. Standing room only.

Reynolds was oblivious to the revolt. When he entered the meeting room, he cordially greeted the parents while hanging his overcoat on a cluttered coat tree. They sat stiffly without responding. The miners appeared uncomfortable in recently washed and ironed bib overalls and starched white shirts, hats and caps in their laps.

Superintendent Harold Bollinger called the meeting to order without acknowledging the presence of the parents. The secretary droned the minutes of the previous meeting. They were approved with no amendments. Copies of the evening's agenda were distributed. The mothers waited politely while the board members deliberated unfinished business, like fixing the toilets in the high school football stadiums in Dawson and Raton, replacing the frayed basketball nets in the Raton gymnasium, and ordering more hardballs for the Dawson baseball team.

The board turned its attention to the annual debate over the recruiting practices of the football coaches at two of the county high schools. Both coaches were present to spy on each other, which they did perennially. When Raton High coach Max Sobota spotted a Dawson High football player he liked, he attempted to find the father a job in one of the mines owned by the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain and Pacific Company. Then the son could attend Raton High School and play on his team.

When Dawson High coach Ray Goodrich spotted a Raton High football player he wanted to recruit, he would attempt to find the player's father a job in one of the Dawson mines owned by Phelps Dodge Corporation. The foremen of both companies willingly cooperated with the recruitment scam because they were short of workers eager to work in their mines. Also, the foremen liked the idea of having good athletes to suit up in the summers to play for the company baseball team.

As an incentive to convince fathers to relocate their families, the coaches offered to pay moving expenses, which they didn't pay from the revenue earned by football games. They expected their own high school principals to foot the bill, if their principals wanted to have a state championship team. For school pride, and mainly their own vanity, the principals desired a trophy, but they expected the superintendent to foot the bill. The superintendent didn't care to foot the bill, either.

One board member, Ray Durant, was an avid football booster and believed moving costs were a necessary expense. He was in the minority, but that didn't stop him from railing incessantly about the importance of having state championship teams. He railed in the style of a senatorial filibuster, speaking nonsense incessantly. Finally, board members grew impatient:

"Enough's enough, Durant," Joe de Salle complained, "it's getting late. Don't know 'bout you, I gotta work tomorrow."

Other board members chimed in: "Cut the bull! Let's get on with it! Enough gab!" Sonny Gerard, the board's chairman, took the signal to end the debate and muzzled Durant by asking the superintendent, "Well, Harold, what should we do?"

"I don't know. Heck, I used to do the same thing, when I was coaching. Took a few state championships myself."

"More an' just a few!" exclaimed Zeke Andrews, one of several of the superintendent's hand-picked board members.

"Of course, I didn't need to pay anyone to move!"

"Nowadays, that's the only way to get the miners to move their families," Coach Goodrich protested. Coach Sobota nodded in agreement.

"Why can't you boys use the talent you got, instead of—"

"Shoot-a-mighty," Coach Sobota said, "down in Santa Fe, they're always stealing players from each other. St. Mike's and Santa Fe High do it all'a time."

A lull in the discussion.

"Yeah, an' one of them schools is always taking State," Coach Goodrich scoffed.

Another lull.

Connie Reynolds entered the fray. "Seems to me that some of us elementary principals could tighten our belts a little an' come up with the money. I saved a bundle on Christmas costumes this year."

"Why, Connie, that's mighty generous of you. What do you gentlemen think?" Superintendent Bollinger turned to the other elementary school principals from Raton, Maxwell, Cimarron, Springer, and all the other elementary schools dotting the Colfax County countryside. They didn't say anything because fiscal matters were beyond their authority. The superintendent gave the high schools the money they needed, and the elementary schools divided the remaining funds. They were accustomed to budget cuts when the high school coaches needed revenue.

Still another lull.

"Okay, boys, that's what we'll do!" Mr. Bollinger rapped the table. The board members and coaches were pleased with the solution and stirred to leave.

"Hold on boys!"

Nessie jumped to her feet, speaking in rapid-fire staccato. "You boys got your heads stuck in football, nothing else. I thought you were a school board? You don't care about our kids. You take money from our young'uns so the coaches can steal players from each other. That the dumbest thing I ever heard!"

The other mothers piped up: "AMEN! UH-HUH! You TELL 'EM, Nessie!"

"You ought to be ashamed." She sustained the blistering attack, ratcheting her volume a few notches higher. "Here you are, high-tone businessmen running the schools like a bunch of jockos, gabbing for nearly two hours about football, and the coaches, and how they're costing the school district money."

She paused for effect. All the men—board members, educators, and miners—sat absolutely still. She continued the harangue: "You're smart enough to know that's our hard-earned money you're talking about! It's not yours. It's for the young'uns."

"AMEN! UH-HUH! You TELL 'EM, Nessie!"

"Didn't you ever have brothers and sisters? They needed good schools. And your mothers—what would they think? They sacrificed so's you could have good schools. That's why you're high-tone businessmen today, good mothers and good schools."

"AMEN! UH-HUH! You TELL 'EM, Nessie!"

"You shouldn't pay moving expenses for anybody. It doesn't matter much if Raton High or Dawson High has a state championship team."

The mothers clapped their hands in unison, stamping the floor with their feet. Coach Goodrich wiggled to the edge of his seat, blustering, "Takes money to win state championships—"

"Yes! And it takes money to educate young'uns, but what's more important, football trophies or young'uns?"

"AMEN! UH-HUH! You TELL 'EM Nessie!"

Board members and educators alike wanted to say football was more important, but they knew better and buttoned their lips.

"Mr. Ray Durant, just what kind of insurance do you sell?"

"Why, all kinds, there's life, hail, wind insurance, why there's all kinds."

"And a family man, he can't never have enough?"

"That's the truth, nothing but the truth."

"Thank you, kindly. And Mr. Sonny Gerard, in your hardware store, do you tell me to buy an inexpensive Kelvinator washer? Or one of the Maytags?"

"I'd tell ya, you get what you buy!"

"Do tell."

"Well, Ness, er, Mrs. Bartholomew, I'd tell you the Kelvinator's cheaper in the short haul. Soon it'd break down and you'd be callin' to fix it. In the long haul, you'd best pay more money for a reliable machine, such as our Maytags. They cost more at the time you purchase, but you won't be callin' to fix it. Tell ya, I've got a deal for you. I'd offer you a good Maytag, on time, mind ya, and so—"

"We not a'lookin'," Mr. Bartholomew screeched from the crowded audience.

"You would agree, though," Nessie persisted, "quality costs a price, eh?"

"Ya, naturally."

"Mr. Joe de Salle, what about the furniture in your store?"

"Nothing but the best, top quality wood and workmanship."

"Best costs a lot?"

"Yes ma'am, I won't sell you a piece of furniture for a few years. I'll sell you a fixture that'll last a lifetime. I got chests can be used to bury you in. Made from gen-u-eeen Lebanon cedar."

"And Mr. Simon Ruben, do you have clothing that's top quality and low dollar?"

"By golly, I dona sell good suit to bury a man. No, by golly, I sell cheap suit to bury him, not like Joe here. I dona use the best material to bury a man. It's a waste to bury man ina chest made from Lebanon cedar. Same'a wit' the suit. I dress a dead man, God rest his soul, ina good lookin' suit, ana cheap material. But, to get married, only the best wool, custom-tailored by me, by golly."

"Dr. Zeke Andrews, you were a medic over in France during the Great War?"

"Yes, yes, part of the medical corps."

"You had the very best medical facilities, equipment, medicines."

"Oh, how I wished, only the best bunch of gull durn soldiers. We could have saved a bunch more boys, but the conditions were terrible, beings we were on the front lines, right behind the trenches."

"You tolerate those conditions at Miners Hospital?"

"Humph! Nothing but the latest and best."

"Gentlemen, you can tell, I'm beating a dead horse. Won't ask all the rest of you high-tone businessmen and ranchers. Won't ask you, because you agree. Quality costs money. Now, why do you want to cut money from our young'uns so's two coaches can win football games?"

They squirmed in their seats as though their mothers were chastising for stealing from the cookie jar, except Coach Goodrich. He was unrepentant. He threw his shoulders back, recoiled like a wounded squirrel, and sat forward in his chair, ready to lambaste Nessie.

"Shh, don't argue. Let her have her say." Coach Sobota tugged Goodrich's sleeve and muttered loud enough for everybody to hear, "Then she'll go home . . . where she belongs."

Goodrich paused long enough to look about the room in search of support from the men in the crowd. It was packed with miners, some of whom he had placed in jobs in order to recruit their sons. They, too, squirmed in their seats, quietly uncomfortable. Cursing under his breath, Coach Goodrich sat back in his chair.

"We're here about something more important than football." Nessie didn't flinch. "We have a petition signed by all the mothers of the young'uns from Gardiner Elementary School. And our men here signed it, too." She swiveled toward the miners, waved the petition, and swiveled back to face the board members, "We want Connie Reynolds fired."

A deafening thunderbolt of silence struck. . . . Hushed gasps . . . and a disquieting alarm resounded as the board members, coaches, and principals scrunched even lower in their seats. Nessie marched to the front of the room and

dropped the petition on the table before Superintendent Bollinger. THUD! The crash of the two-page petition rumbled like a massive unabridged *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* thumping on the table.

The men were baffled . . . boggled . . . bamboozled. Women were imperial queens of the house, not the meeting room, they thought. The stillness of the moment blared loudly, as though a huge, silent vacuum cleaner had sucked the air from the room, the board members, superintendent, coaches, and principals, especially Reynolds. The silence was deafening . . . devastating. You could have heard a mosquito yawn.

None dared speak, including the unrepentant Coach Goodrich, who guffawed sarcastically under his barely audible breath, "Humph! Women's suffrage, kisisisi!"

When the superintendent finally regained his composure, he meekly asked Nessie, who was strutting to her seat to rejoin the other mothers. "Mrs. Bartholomew, I can't remember when I been scolded so well. I thank you for that, reminding us about our jobs. But what you're proposing is terribly radical. Why do you want me to, er, fire Mr. Reynolds?"

"Read the petition. It's about the Christmas pageant."

She waved to the others, who rose defiantly from their chairs and left the room. Superintendent Bollinger and the board members sat stone-still until the parents were safely out the room while Reynolds watched at the window until all the miners and their wives drove away. On Reynolds's signal, Mr. Bollinger read the petition aloud and threw it on the table.

"By golly, I don't like surprises! The whole board's embarrassed," he said.

"Me, neither!" goaded Coach Goodrich.

"Low blow!" Coach Sobota chided.

"Well, heck! It wasn't my fault that—"

"I just don't like surprises! Meeting adjourned."

In June of 1921, Nessie perused the school announcements published in the *Raton Daily Range* until she found

Mind Your Mothers

the Colfax County Board announcements regarding retirements, resignations, new-hires, and transfers. Connie Reynolds was part of the announcement: “Mr. Reynolds transferred to Columbian School, Raton.” Nessie folded the newspaper, concluding, “Won the battle, lost the war. Them high-tone board members didn’t have the grit to tell us mothers to our faces. Football is more important than our kids to them.”

Un Cuento Viejo/An Old Story

Es qué the Lord had a problema. There were too many Hispanos living in the Raton region. Many of the *viejos* were living too long and not enough *niños* were dying like in the old days before there were hospitals, doctors, and nurses. También, the Lord's guardian angels were doing a good job protecting elders, children, and drunks.

This would not be such a big problema, pero Americans might find out the Lord favored Hispanos. No, He wasn't prejudiced against the Americans. He treated them as equal to Africans, Australians, Asians, and Europeans. He simply favored Hispanos, for when He made Hispanos, He gave them beautiful women, handsome men, and good children. To provide care, He gave each Hispano two guardian angels. He didn't always do that for Americans, or for those from the other continents. Some women weren't beautiful, men handsome, and kids good, and they received only one guardian angel for protection.

The Lord had to solve the problema. How to keep the Americans placated so they wouldn't learn the Lord favored Hispanos. The Lord couldn't do much about the hospitals, doctors, and nurses. Hispanos—la gente, the gentle people, they called themselves—would say He was bad if He took the *médicos* away. Besides, that would be too apparent and la gente would detect His motive. Instead, He decided to make guardian angels into death angels. La gente would never notice the change. There would be one less guardian angel to protect each of la gente and one more death angel to collect his soul.

He ordered the new death angels to help La Muerte, the Angel of Death. Anyway, she was very old and needed help. The newly assigned death angels were to deliver Hispano souls from the Raton region or else suffer the consequences, that is, they would be transferred to work in Hell. Immediately, they went to work, but after five years there still were too many Hispanos in the region. The Lord reviewed the job performance of the new angels. All were working to expectations, except one new death angel who was sleeping on the job. He hadn't brought a single Hispano soul to Heaven.

The Lord summoned the angel Plácido to His throne to talk the matter over.

"Qué pasa, Plácido?"

"Aquí, no más."

"Why are you so perezoso?"

"I'm no lazy bum, Boss."

"Humph!" The Lord didn't pull any punches with Plácido. "We must say, we are not pleased. You have not brought a single Hispano soul to Heaven since you have been on the job helping La Muerte."

"Por Dios, I don't like being a death angel. I liked it better when I was a guardian angel. The death job is demeaning."

"Nonsense, all our work is noble. It matters not if you're a guardian angel or a death angel. The righteous have nothing to fear of our angels."

"Pero when I was a guardian angel, people liked to have me around. They even taught the children to thank me with a prayer. This job of taking lost souls is for the birds. Nobody likes you."

"Ah ha! You want la gente to like you."

"Patrón, now when I go looking for souls to be passed on, people avoid me. They act like I have a disease. When they hear I'm in the barrio, they pass the word around to be wary of me. They say to 'watch out, La Muerte's about.' And, when I'm around, their ears ring, giving them warning. So they cross themselves, saying before praying, 'Anda La

Muerte cerca—The Angel of Death is near, keep away,' they warn others."

"O, sí! And, here's our dicho: 'De La Muerte y de la suerte, no hay quién escape—From death and fate, one does not escape.' " The Lord reminded Plácido of His dicho.

"Patrón, la gente aren't too excited about our dichos."

"Plácido, you worry too much about la gentes' feelings. People are fickle. They're not so nice to each other. They make promises, even sign treaties, but they always break them."

"But, Boss, that is their way. They soon learn to trust no one. When they make promises, even treaties, it is understood they are lying."

"They are not supposed to lie. That is one of our Commandments."

"Sí, Boss, but You made them in our image. It is not their fault—"

"Humph!" The Lord took umbrage with Plácido's implication that la gente lied because they were made in His image. "I am not lying to you. Bring me some Hispano souls from the Raton region, or I'll send you to work for Lucifer."

"Lucifer? The devil?"

"The same. He is always looking for *pochos* to do his dirty work."

"Boss, the sharp words sting. I'm no pocho. Yo creo qué you are too hard on la gente."

"Humph! Humph! We are not too hard, just the opposite. Not only are la gente mean to each other, they are not nice to us. Some time ago, I sent them my only Son to tell them things could be okay, if they just tried to get along with each other. And what happened? They nailed Him to a cross. That was a rough time, but what can One expect when One makes something out of mud? I had to pull Him right out of there."

"That was a long time ago, Pátron. I think maybe people are better now."

"No matter. They're still fickle. Even the righteous are in no rush to come to my house. We need your help. Perhaps, you are going about it the wrong way? To get la gente to give

up their souls, you have to be muy macho. Speak very loud as though you are We. Tell them you are here on our authority, pero mande con una voz grande. Speak with a loud voice that you have come for one of them, like this:

Yo soy un Angel de Dios
Y vengo por uno de los dos!"

Plácido didn't answer right away. He was a timid angel and not accustomed to being tough with people. Yet he had no desire to work for the Devil. The Lord continued to give advice. "Don't take any guff or let anyone be sassy. When it comes to dying, la gente don't like to leave the chassis."

While speaking, the Lord noticed Plácido's continual scowl, noticing he wasn't suited for the new job. The Lord lowered His voice. "Look around in Raton. Surely, Hispanos who live in such a place, named after rodents, are begging to be delivered. There are many coal camps in the area, too. Many Hispanos work in the mines. They must not value their lives, or they wouldn't work in the mines. Pero, you must mande con un voz grande:

Yo soy un Angel de Dios
Y vengo por uno de los dos."

"Really, Boss? Hispanos live in Raton, the place of the rodents? I knew they lived in the coal camps, with such strange names as Starkville, Swastika, and Sugarite, but Raton?" Plácido considered the two-horned dilemma: give the place of the rodents, Raton, a try where it might be easy to extricate a few Hispano souls, or work in Hell with Lucifer. The place of the rodents was an unknown in the cosmos. Hell, on the other horn of the dilemma, was well known for its terrible heat and miserable souls. The place of the rodents seemed the duller of the dilemma's two points. "I'll take my chances in Raton."

"Atta boy! Atta boy!" The Lord was delighted. "Bueno suerte and bless you. You'll feel much better once you've brought back a few. The righteous will thank you. They have nothing

to fear, and all the rest? Humph! Let them cry a salty tear.” The Lord gave him a final blessing and sent him away.

Plácido flew to the eastside barrio of Raton where many Hispanos live. He went into the sala at San Jose Church on Martinez Street, where many retired miners and their wives were gossiping and playing bingo. He became nervous and jittery. He recognized many of the old people, the viejos, because he guarded them when they worked in the mine. His legs started to shake, and when he spoke, his voice trembled and quivered as though he had just spotted a ghost:

“Yo soy un Angel de Dios
Y vengo por uno de los dos.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Los viejitos laughed and laughed, qué risa, at such a shabby sound and sight. Plácido didn’t look or sound very macho. He became more nervous when he heard the viejos laughing at him, and worried, “Qué relaje, what a disgrace, even the old miners aren’t afraid of me.” Again, his voice trembled and quivered as he stammered:

“Yo soy un Angel de Dios
Y vengo por uno de los dos.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” The old people broke into unrestrained laughter, hollering at Plácido. “Veté! Go away!” They kicked him out the sala cola entre las piernas—with tail hanging between his legs—as the viejos say.

He was hard up and down on his luck. He thought, “Maybe I could scare the young children at school.” He went by Longfellow Elementary School. Again, just as at the sala, he recognized some of the children in the playground, especially the ones he used to guard, such as Leona, Bardo, Angie, Alvin, Sammie, Julie, even Mongoose and Spider, who were *bato locos* and needed extra guarding. Some of his former amigos popped up. They were the guardian angels watching over the school. He became excited and yelled, “Qué tal, amigos!”

His former amigos rushed at him and raised their fists to punch him: “Shoo! Quítate!—Get outta here!”

“But, I’m one of you.”

“No, you’re not! Not anymore,” they said, threatening, flailing their arms and swinging punches in the air. They meant business and Plácido was afraid of them. Right away he flew from the barrio and over the railroad tracks to the Swastika Hotel. It was built in the modern deco-art style of 1929 with swastikas in the bricks around the rim of the hotel. It was swanky—four stories with sixteen guest rooms per floor, a café, ballroom, barbershop, lady’s reading room, and a comfortable lounge. An electric hand-operated elevator carried guests to their rooms.

Plácido alighted on the window ledge of a hotel room. “Ah me, ah me.” Plácido descended into deep despair, moaning to himself and muttering, “Working in Raton is not so easy. The viejos aren’t afraid of me, and the children are well guarded by my former amigos. What am I to do? I can’t return to Boss empty-handed. He’ll send me to Hell. Ah me, ah me.” He sulked, fearful for his future.

Somebody opened the window on the ledge where he brooded. Plácido could hear a Hispano *novio y novia*. The two lovers had just married and were on their honeymoon, pledging their love to each other. He almost flew away. “Lovers are not looking to die,” he thought. “Oh, well, I’ll rest here for a while. Then, I’ll go looking again.” He stayed on the ledge, with hands covering his ears. Yet he could still hear the loud, boastful lovers bragging of their undying love for the other.

“My love for you is deeper than the ocean,” the man claimed.

“My love for you is wider than the heavens,” she bragged.

“Oh, no! My love’s greater! My love for you will last as long as the sun and moon will shine.” He was not to be outdone.

“Shsss! My love is greater! My love for you will last to the end of eternity.” She, too, made the bolder claim.

“Brag, brag, brag,” Plácido thought. “Both these lovers sure like to brag about their eternal love. I’m wasting time here.”

Just as Plácido was about to fly away, he overheard one lover say: “Dearest, I will make a rhyme about the depth of my love for you: ‘E-nee, me-nee, my-nee-mow, I hope to die before you go.’ ”

“Oh, how sweet.” She replied, “I, too, can make a rhyme: ‘Roses are red, violets are blue, I hope to die before you do.’ ”

“Hijo!” Plácido thought, “these Hispanos want to die.”

Swoosh! He rushed to their front door and knocked very hard. Knock! Knock! Knock! He hollered loudly as the Lord instructed:

“Yo soy un Angel de Dios
Y yengo por uno de los dos.”

Silencio. Inside the bridal suite, the two lovers fell silent. “Maybe they didn’t hear me,” Placido surmised. “I’ll knock harder. And yell louder.” Knock! Knock! Knock!

“ Yo soy un Angel de Dios
Y vengo por uno de los dos.”

The two lovers regressed from talking too much to not talking at all. After a long delay, the man pretended he was not Hispano and could not understand Plácido. He pretended to speak in Spanish by speaking in English like Americans, by adding a vowel at the end of each English word:

“Hel-lo! We-o no-o speak-o Mex-e-can-o.”

Plácido was affronted, his feathers ruffled. The placid guardian angel turned death angel shouted: “You get my goat!” He shouted muy gallo—crowing like a mad rooster. “How dare you talk to me that way! I am an Angel of the Lord! Don’t you know, I am multilingual and can *sprechen* *parlez-vous* con any gringo!”

Silencio from within.

“I told you once, and I told you twice, I am an Angel of the Lord, and I come for either one of you!”

Silencio . . . not a peep . . . nor a breath . . . silencio. . . . The *novios* were absolutely silent, frightened . . . terrified. . . . No one escapes fate . . . or death.

“Which would it be?” Plácido pondered. “Both lovers claimed such strong love for the other. Both said they would rather be the first to die.” Just then, Plácido heard the two lovers speak at the same time, requesting the same thing:

“Honey, be a sweetie, see who’s at the door.”

Ladies Ride Sidesaddle

"I wanna go to the dance."

"No."

"Why not, my chores are done."

"Dancing is forbidden during Lent."

"Joe Ray's going."

"He's Protestant." Arturo's mother sternly scolded, "I'll hear no more."

Arturo was angry but not impudent and did not sass his mother. Instead, he stepped outside the house to the portal, where he hunkered, pouting for a long time.

Una *vaquera bonita* came riding by. Sinfully delectable, she rode astride a black stallion, like a cowboy with both feet in the stirrups. Her coal-black hair cascaded to the small of her back from beneath a wide-brimmed bolero hat. She was dressed entirely in black, except for a crimson scarf loosely draping around her neck and shoulders.

Arturo was infatuated by the stunning *vaquera*. Poised and confident, she sat erect in the saddle and appeared to be poured into a form-fitting black satin blouse that flowed by her small waist into tight-fitting satin slacks tucked into tall black-leather riding boots. Silver spurs with golden rowels jangled at her heels as the stallion trotted. Tight black-leather gloves covered her hands.

She spotted Arturo pouting on the portal. Dismounting the stallion, she allowed the reins to fall to the ground while she sauntered along the short walk to the portal and spoke brazenly. "Oye, vamos pa'l baile!—Hey, come with me to the dance!" The ravishing *vaquera* was inviting Arturo.

Like her outfit, her phosphorescent eyes were coal-black. Her rosy cheeks glowed. Dumbfounded, Arturo stared at the ravenous beauty.

“Did the cat bite your tongue?” she coyly cooed.

“Oh, no.” Arturo momentarily recovered from the trance. “I can’t go.” He blushed, swooned by the beauty’s charm.

“You can ride my stallion. We can ride double.” She pointed gracefully to the handsome stallion with its silky black mane. The stallion snorted, shaking the reins.

Arturo whisked to the stallion. “Sure, why shouldn’t I go?” He looked at the vaquera and shrugged, “Why not?” For a fleeting moment, thoughts flashed of his mother and her prohibition against dancing during Lent. Yet the beautiful young woman was alluring. She smiled and locked her smoldering eyes on his. Spellbound, he returned the smile and waited eagerly for her to mount the stallion.

Placing one foot in the stirrup, she mounted and then kicked her foot from the stirrup, inviting Arturo to mount. She reached down, took his hand, and pulled him onto the stallion. He sat behind her. As she clucked the stallion to go, he reached around her waist. The black satin shirt felt sleek and hot. The heat of her body was feverish; touching it was like holding a warm puppy against your chest.

They galloped away from the portal, and Arturo tried not to think of the heat emanating from her body as he clung to her waist tightly. Never had he felt such heat and liked it so much. He glanced back at the ranch house. Again, fleeting flashes of his mother provoked him—she wagged her finger, dictating: “Dancing is forbidden during Lent.”

The image of his stern mother in the kitchen quickly faded as the stallion galloped rapidly down the road. Arturo’s nostrils pinched at a caustic odor. He peered backward and spied singed spots in the unruly turf. Each time a hoof of the stallion struck the prairie grasses, sparks and then flames flared, filling the air with a sulfuric odor as the dancing flame flickered and fizzled out.

The trailing prints, which looked more like the cloven hoofs of a goat than the hoofs of a stallion, vanished as

quickly as they ignited. Arturo became frightened, shouting, "You're going too fast!"

Ignoring Arturo, the vivacious vaquera hied the stallion faster, galloping down the Kiowa road and across the bridge that spanned the Carrizo Creek. After crossing the bridge, she veered the stallion to the side of the road, up a slope, and dropped into a gully, leading to a deeply gouged canyon of jagged black lava flows where sunlight rarely reached. Unperturbed by the sharp rocks strewn on the trail, the stallion maintained full gait until the canyon walls widened. There the vaquera stopped the stallion in a bosque of scrawny piñon and contorted ponderosa pines. "Muy extraño—very strange," Arturo pondered aloud. "Kiowa had few trees."

"Do you have a rosary?"

"Always, around my neck."

"Why don't you take it off?"

"Qué va!"

"Oh, it's too serious for the dance."

Arturo hesitated. He carried the rosary everywhere he went. And how would she know he carried it? Besides, the vaquera did not ride sidesaddle. In another fleeting flash, his mother admonished, "Dancing is forbidden in Lent." He fretted, "Say? What are you up to?"

"Oh, don't be so serious," she cooed, and blinked her smoldering eyes. "You can't have fun, always having a rosary around your neck."

Because she was so alluring, Arturo forgot he was afraid. "I don't know your name." Arturo was *todo encantado*, totally enchanted by the vaquera.

"Just call me Vi. See here, Arturo, I want very much for you to take me to the dance. I want to be seen with you. You're so tall and handsome. But the gang will laugh when they see your rosary. They will say, 'Look, Vi is here at the dance with a saint.' I will be embarrassed. Please take off your rosary for me." Again, she spoke in sultry, coy tones. "Please hang the rosary on that small pine tree for me." She delicately pointed to the smallest of the pine trees in the bosque. "We'll pick it up when we return from the dance."

Arturo was moonstruck. Entranced, he tipped his chin, lifted the rosary from around his neck, reached down beside the stallion, and hung the rosary on the small pine tree. He glanced about and observed there were other small pine trees in the same bosque. He noted, "This bosque is the way I will remember where I've hung my rosary."

Vi dug spurs into the stallion's haunches. Off they galloped to a large meadow, where a grand pavilion rose from the prairie. The massive ballroom jutted abruptly from the ground, a gaudy, bulky fortress of bricks, stones, mortar, boards, and logs. Built in the admixture style of the Dorsey mansion near Springer, half of the ballroom consisted of a huge two-story log cabin, and the other half a Gothic structure garnished by a sandstone castle tower and fretted turrets like a medieval castle.

Lively music pulsed from within the ballroom in the style of Glenn Miller with a boogie-woogie, swinging rhythm. Vi stopped the stallion out front. Arturo eagerly slipped down the side of the stallion, and Vi dismounted. She tied the stallion's reins to a hitching rail in front of the mansion, beside other tethered black stallions. Vi took Arturo by the arm, and proudly he escorted her into the mansion's ballroom.

Everything sparkled. The crimson tiles of the dance floor glowed like hot coals. The chandeliers, gilded in gold, were laden with exquisite crystal, the walls paneled in cherry and redwood pine. Polished onyx mantels encased numerous fireplaces, which flickered with fast-burning fires. Arturo inferred that the drafts weren't working properly when he smelled a pervasive odor of smoke permeating the entire dance hall as if everybody was puffing a cigar.

Many boys jitterbugged with beautiful vaqueras. Each was uniquely resplendent, yet each one was attired in black with a crimson scarf draping on her shoulders. Arturo and Vi twirled through several dances. Strutting and prancing gracefully around the dance floor, Arturo and Vi wove through the crowd like a mellow breeze among the trees. Vi was a good dancer, and Arturo was having fun. After a

while, other boys asked Vi to dance. Wanting to rest, Arturo excused himself, allowing the other boys their turn.

After playing five or six jitterbug pieces, the bandleader stopped the music. He was dressed in a black tuxedo. Medallions like the skull-and-bones of a pirate's banner were pinned to the lapels. The tails of the tuxedo draped on both sides of a hairy, arrow-tipped, curving tail, which no one seemed to notice. He slipped a red satin mask over his eyes and nose, and announced in a raspy, baritone voice:

"Gentlemen! The dance ends with a lasting memory, a kiss from the beautiful vaquera you escorted to the dance. If you wish to kiss her, please form a line, up front here by the band. Each of you will have a chance to go behind the bandstand, to the back room, where your own beautiful girl will allow you to kiss her in private."

The boys stampeded to the front of the bandstand and almost knocked Arturo to the floor as they formed the line. Arturo was at the back of the line. He noticed that after entering the back room, the boys did not return to the ballroom. Before he could make sense of the boys' sudden disappearance, Arturo's turn came. Wobbling his tail, the bandleader rushed him to the back of the band, admonishing, "*Andalé! Andalé!*"

Arturo scurried around the bandstand and spied Vi leaning on the door frame. Provocatively, she wiggled her finger, drew him into the back room, and whispered coyly, "You must promise to close your eyes. And I'll give you a long, wet kiss."

"*Qué beso tan bueno!*—Oh, what a great kiss!" Ecstasy surged through Arturo. He closed his eyes and clasped her waist.

Vi pursed her lips into a ruby red pucker, pulled Arturo close, and transformed into a huge rattlesnake with large yellow eyes and slits for pupils. Her forked tongue wagged and jittered quickly between two large fangs. Arturo felt Vi's hot flesh turn cold but kept his eyes closed and leaned forward to kiss when he felt his Confirmation scapular slip from beneath his shirt. Believing Vi would not think well of

it, he reached down to tuck the scapular back into his shirt and fumbled with a button. He had to open his eyes to see where to put the scapular. Then he spied the huge snake. "María Purísima!"

Pop! The Devil's bubble burst. Everything vanished. Arturo was standing in an empty meadow, the sun rising above the mesa. It was dawn. Gone was the beautiful woman named Vi, short for *víbora*, a word for snake. Gone was the band, and the bandleader dressed like the Devil. Gone was the gaudy ballroom and mansion. Gone were the handsome black stallions. Gone were all the other boys and the beautiful vaqueras who escorted them. When Arturo invoked the name of the Virgin Mary, the Devil and all his workers vanished.

Arturo found himself in pine and brush terrain very unlike Kiowa country, an expansive prairie on the western edge of the Great Plains akin to the undulating, swelling grasslands of Nebraska, where soil and grass prevail. Here, rocks and boulders predominated. With hardly any rainfall and a smattering of grass, only the hardiest brush and pines survived the arid terrain. Arturo was in a malpais, badlands sprinkled with mounds of basalt boulders, wrinkled lava flows, volcanic cones, and sandstone monoliths. Some monoliths were little more than bases for needle spires and spikes of irregular height. Some were lateral dikes of sandstone protruding from the rocky ground, and others appeared to be clipper ships sailing across the rocky, arid malpais.

The scrawny piñon and contorted ponderosa were much larger, though twisted and scraggly, than Arturo recalled. He searched for his rosary among the tall pines because he couldn't find the bosque of small pines where he had hung it. Without the rosary, he couldn't get his bearings to return to Kiowa country. Perhaps he could find a path where the stallion's hooves had seared the grass? None. Instead, he found sparse grasses, patches clinging in the cracks of the rocky floor of sandstone and shale.

Arturo wandered aimlessly, searching the bosque for the small pine trees. None. Everywhere he looked, he found

only large contorted trees or tiny seedlings. On the first day, he almost stepped on a prickly pear cactus. Plucking its delicate flower, he smelled its sweet nectar and realized he was hungry. He ate it, found others, and ate their flowers as well. Craving more, he pulled the stickers from the prickly pear cactuses and ate the soft, juicy plants as pancakes. The sundry varieties of cactuses were lifesavers, providing fiber and water.

On the eastern horizon, jagged lightning flickered frenetically and promised rain, but the thunderheads were hundreds of miles away. Arturo's meadow had no fresh water or buffalo wallows to store water, if rain were to come. The day passed wretchedly slow. Minutes tarried into hours, and the hours crept dolefully. In the slumbering shadows of dusk, Arturo gathered and then stomped on slender pine needles fallen beneath the contorted trees, building a bed. With no matches for a fire, he was easy prey for mountain lions and packs of coyotes, although he didn't fret about the possibilities after evading the Devil. He was more lonely than afraid.

Admittedly, the sunset over the malpais was resplendent and beyond comparison to any he'd seen in Kiowa country. As the encroaching night slipped a cover of darkness over the dimming daylight, the sky was etched by soft earth tones of pink and red and turquoise green. Tiny wisps of clouds faded into the nightly shroud. Slowly, the beams of tiny stars and a sickle moon trickled into the darkness, providing meager lighting in the immense sky of the malpais.

At a distance, Arturo spied an eerie array of lights forming an archway, followed by a boulevard of lampposts stretching into the darkness and narrowing to a dot on the horizon. He noticed that what appeared to be lampposts were holes of pure light emanating from the ground about fifty yards apart, forming a boulevard that wove among sandstone monoliths and volcanic cones.

Arturo remembered a *cuento* told by his *abuelo* Ofelio Quintana. These peculiar lights forming a boulevard were the souls of wayward people, *almas penando*—souls in agony, *Abuelo Quintana* called them. These grieving lost souls illu-

minated a path to the source of their wrongdoings. Robbers, like Black Jack Ketchum, led you to their stolen money or goods. If you found and returned the stolen treasures to the rightful owners, the lost souls would be released by the Devil, if the Devil didn't catch you first and take possession of your soul.

A strong gust of wind at Arturo's back shoved him through the glowing archway. He was enveloped in pristine light while a mighty magnetic attraction pulled him along the brightly illuminated path sucking him into a vortex, which ended at the grand ballroom where he had danced during Lent with Vi before she turned into a snake.

Vi awaited him. She sat provocatively with legs crossed on the polished mahogany railing in front of the ballroom entry, seductively wiggling her fingers, tempting him onward to the Devil's den. Arturo halted in his tracks, turned, and fled, dashing down the path while the almas penando wailed, intensifying the grievously sad and sorry sobs of the other boys who had danced with the Devil's lackeys during Lent. The boys' sad, sorry faces writhed in agony. Arturo was startled to see so many boys who had taken the wrong path, but what he saw next terrified him.

There was Black Jack Ketchum carrying his head severed at his hanging. The Mexican killer and train robber stroked the bloody hair on his head and the grizzled beard of his unshaven face while maggots prodded his nose and ears.

There was the serial killer of the Moreno Valley, Charles Kennedy. He, too, carried his shriveled head that was severed by Clay Allison and displayed on a pike pole in front of Lambert's Saloon in Cimarron. The head with sightless eyes had rotted on the pike pole in the street for everyone to see. The shriveled, sunken face with its hollow eye sockets vividly displayed what comes to killers in Cimarron country.

There were the vigilantes from Raton who went to the Otero jail and kidnapped Dr. Washington while he was awaiting trial for an alleged crime in Raton. They carried him to a railroad water tank beside the railroad track and hanged him without benefit of a trial. Knotted hangman

nooses were tautly tied around the vigilantes' necks and tethered to a water tank.

There was gambler Gus Menser, who conducted a shooting spree in the Bank Exchange Saloon in Raton and killed three innocent men and wounded two others before he was finally gunned down. He carried two six-shooters with long rifle barrels curved backwards so bullets penetrated his belly when he fired.

Chills . . . goose bumps . . . chills prickled up and down Arturo's body, and the hair on his arms stood straight. He blinked his eyes and rubbed them, trying to rub away the apparitions. He blinked again. Tears came to his eyes, now bleary from the bright lights and illuminated visions of the lost souls. The road to perdition is posted and blazed all the way. Run, Arturo, run! As he dashed by each alma penando, it wailed woefully and receded into the ground.

Once safely back in the meadow among the trees, he decided he would not explore the lights again. He matted the pine needles and fell into the sleep of an exhausted soul who twice had escaped the Devil's grasp.

When he awoke, his stomach growled in hunger. He found several small barrel cactuses, removed their prickly needles, and ate them as he once ate apples. He took heart in the fact that he was not a lost soul. In fact, he had repulsed the Devil twice. Because he was a lost boy, he decided to stay in one place, hoping that others would find him. He knew it was important to keep track of time, just as other lost people had done. With each passing day, Arturo placed a rock in the middle of the meadow to keep count of the days, although the days passed wretchedly slow. He continued hunting for the rosary and eating prickly pear pancakes and the sour berries of lemite bushes.

After Arturo had placed ten rocks in the middle of the meadow, he expressed anguish: "How will anyone find me? No one, not even my parents, knows my whereabouts." His thoughts drifted back to the time he was a small boy when his Abuelo Quintana had warned: "Cuidado con la mujer que no monta a caballo al lado de la silla." Arturo was young and

didn't understand the wisdom of his grandfather's advice "to be wary of the woman who doesn't ride sidesaddle."

Arturo wallowed in deep despondency. "Ah, me! I shoulda remembered Abuelo's advice. Here I am, forlorn . . . forsaken." Arturo slumped onto the meadow's grassy floor, despondent . . . devastated. For a very long time, he skulked on the grass, sobbing, crying for himself and his sad condition. Solo, he was alone like a fallen leaf, lost and tossed by the wind. . . .

Clip-clop, clip-clop. The faint, steady footfall of a donkey jerked Arturo from his misery. As the donkey neared the meadow, Arturo spotted a lady riding a donkey sidesaddle. Arturo stood abruptly. The lady spotted him but wasn't startled to observe a long-bearded man in tattered shirt and pants too small for him, a bedraggled vagabond.

"Olá! Cómo le va?" She greeted him cordially. Dressed plainly with a small white scarf fastened over her long, loosely hanging auburn hair, she was plain-looking with the high cheekbones and narrow nose of an india. She had smooth brown skin and dark, penetrating eyes.

Ambivalent, bewildered, and happy to be found, Arturo blabbered, "I'm here because I disobeyed my mother. I went to a dance with Vi. She was the Devil's helper; she rode a black stallion; she told me to leave my rosary. She turned into a snake. Now, I can't find my rosary, and—"

"Alto! You're blabbering too much! Here you are, a grown man, ranting and raving like a baby. Tell me, are you lost?"

"Oh, yes, I've been here for ten days, unable to find my way home."

"Ten days? You appear to be a scarecrow with rags for clothing, and a beard that drapes like Spanish moss. Ten days? No, more like ten years."

"Pues, estoy seguro! I am certain. I have been searching for my rosary for ten days with nothing to eat but cactus. I've had no soap to wash, or razor to shave. Ah, me, I have sinned greatly, and I'm being punished."

"Stop! No more self-pity. Think of how to get home."

"Of that, I am not certain. Only of the date am I certain, March 19, 1940. Look at my rock pile." Arturo proudly pointed to the ten rocks standing in the middle of the meadow. "With each passing day, I placed one rock on the pile. I came to be here on the morning of March 9, ten days ago."

"Ay, qué lástima! Probrecito, you have been lost too long. You are really confused. You don't even know the date."

"Qué va!" Arturo protested, "I tell you, it's March 19th—"

"March 19th, 1950, to the very day. You have been lost for ten years."

"Ten years?"

"Yes. Look at your clothing, torn and tattered, and your beard so long and scraggly. The soles of your shoes are worn through."

Arturo studied his clothing, "Oooh, it's true. No wonder each day passed as slowly as a year. Ah, me, the best years of my youth—"

"Cállate la boca!—Shut your mouth! Let's search for your rosary so you can go home." The lady and donkey trotted off searching among the trees. Arturo followed. The lady glanced back and saw Arturo searching low to the ground for small pine trees.

"Alto! Take your gaze from the ground. Look to the heavens, high in the sky."

An owl swooped from the sky and landed on the ledge of a sandstone monolith.

"Look, Arturo, this is a good sign. Let's follow the owl."

The owl leapt from the ledge and glided across the meadow where Arturo had piled the ten rocks, landing in a bosque of contorted ponderosas.

"Oh, the owl's no help. I hung my rosary on the smallest of the pines. These trees are too tall. It's the wrong place."

"Shh, don't frighten the owl. He's an emissary."

The owl hopped from branch to branch in the crown of the tall, contorted ponderosa. Its branches flailed violently as though a windstorm were threshing them about. With a

magnificent burst of energy, the owl fluttered its wings and soared into the open sky.

“María Purísima! My rosary’s falling from the tree.” Arturo jumped forward and caught the falling rosary. “Here it is! My rosary! I can go home. Gracias a Dios!” He fell to his knees, mumbling a prayer thanking God for this gift from Heaven.

“Vaya con Dios,” The lady smiled and blessed Arturo, beseeching him to walk with God. Shaking the donkey’s reins, she rode away.

“Wait, don’t go! I haven’t found my way home.”

“You will.”

The lady clucked the donkey and flapped its reins. The donkey’s footfall faded as they slipped through the contorted ponderosas.