

BEYOND BORDERS

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Honorable Mention, Fiction

MY HAND WAS SMALL IN MY father's as I tried to keep up with his long stride. We passed cars barricaded behind fences with rolls of barbed wire. Sun glistened on the steel points. I slowed down, and a big dog, a Doberman with only one ear, growled at me from the fence. His bark rattled my ears like gunshots.

We joined the crowd that was walking down the sidewalk. The air smelled of fajitas and fry bread and outhouses. Mariachi music, loud and boisterous, blared from an adobe cantina on the corner. Twin parrots eyed the visitors from overhead as the doors swung open, then closed, releasing slow breaths of cool air into the hot street.

We were closer now, and the sidewalk sloped down a little. I could see a massive wall, with three arches in it. The wave of people heading for it swept on, carrying us with it. I looked around at the once-bright buildings that had faded with age. Around me, voices sang out in English and torrents of Spanish raced through my head like race horses in the last quarter mile—a blur of disjointed images. They rolled over each other in my mind, until I could only hear one language, a laughing stream that danced and flickered.

Soon the crush of people around us grew too large, and the buildings were blocked out. I could only look at the sidewalks, and my eyes traced little patterns in the flaws. *Don't step on a crack, or you'll fall and break your back.* The rhyme rolled through my head as I tried to step deftly over the cement faults. Some squares were cracked in half; those were as easy as hopscotch. Others, though, seemed to be covered with spider webs of little cracks, tracing lines all over the cement. You almost had to be a ballerina to not hit those. I went for a block and a half before I bumped into someone, and my father pulled me closer to him with a sharp word. I closed my eyes, so I wouldn't see all the cracks I was walking on.

When we got to the gates, the crowd of people flowed through onto the bridge between the gated arches and the little town. I tried not to look at the people sitting on ragged blankets, their wares sparkling in stark contrast to their ragged appearance. We had to stop so Mom could tie my brother's shoes. While my father warned me again not to drink the water or eat anything anyone offered me, I looked over the edge of the bridge. The empty riverbed was filled with trash, and more cardboard boxes lined the edges. Below me, a man climbed out of one, stretched, and turned to face the bridge support. I caught a whiff of the outhouse smell and turned away quickly.

People milled around the plaza in a cacophony of color and noise. There were more cantinas and restaurants here. Guys and girls gyrated together to the sounds coming from a street musician's keyboard. Tanned children about my age skittered back and forth like insects, their eyes large and liquid as they dangled beaded necklaces and bracelets in front of tourists. The shops were crowded,

and I found myself wishing I could ride on my father's shoulders like little Jesse. The heat of the day mingled with the smell of cigarettes and leather, and the crush of people made it hard to breathe.

We escaped the shadow of the arches and the noisy plaza, dodging past a row of boys with beads that had been following us for three stores. The further we moved from those big arches, the quieter the city was. My parents guided my brother and I to the smaller, quieter areas of town. Pottery shops rubbed shoulders with stores selling blankets and leather statues.

We stepped into a little shop that rested in the shadow of the lane. Filmy bits of cloth hung from the ceiling like fairy wings, and the shelves and tables were filled with bits of lace and cloth, blankets, tablecloths, and curtains. Unlike the shops and cantinas outside, the sounds of a guitar drifted from a battered tape player near the register. While my mother ventured deeper into the stacks of material, the rest of us selling near the door so we didn't damage anything.

My mother and the shopkeeper talked in Spanish while I looked at the yards of material near me. When I looked back, I saw that the shopkeeper had pulled a white tablecloth from a shelf. Pulling it free from the dusty cover, she opened it, revealing a beautiful, winding pattern of roses and ivy. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen.

"Que lindo." I watched my mother as she examined the lace tablecloth, running her fingers over the delicate pattern. She looked at it wistfully, then shook her head and started to put it back. The old woman moved in closer, pushing it back toward her a little, and they both talked. I strained to hear, to catch the flowing magic of the language I was just learning. My brother's lungs were larger than my ears, and I found myself being pulled closer to the door, further from the snow-white tablecloth. I stood on my toes, peering over stacked bolts of fabric, as bright as a parrot's wing, watching the woman. She rubbed her tanned fingers across the twining roses and ivy, and my mother did the same. My father leaned toward the door again, then pulled my brother away from a shelf before he could topple the stacks of linens and colorful pottery.

Slipping my fingers free of his while he was distracted, I wound my way around the table to stand next to my mother. The woman looked down at me and smiled. Her face was tired, and her black hair had bits of gray that curled wildly near her face in the summer humidity. She looked like someone's grandmother. I smiled back.

"Que piensa, mi hija?" Even in this little world, my mother wouldn't say my name in front of strangers. She stroked my braid with her fingers and held the tablecloth closer, so I could touch it. It was soft, and my fingers traced a rose that bloomed near the corner. I liked roses; they reminded me of England, the home and secret gardens I had always longed for but never known. But we had roses. Roses could bloom even in our desert. If you looked out the window just right on a rainy day, the water made the mesquite trees go blurry. It almost looked like England. I could tell instantly that these were English roses, big fat blooms that opened their face and arms to the sun.

But now I had to answer. Some of it was easy. Roses were *la rosa* and *el mantel* was tablecloth. Or napkin. I couldn't quite remember which. But what was ivy? And snow?

"Me gustan. Las rosas son muy bonitas," I said, with my r-sounds dropping like boulders on the tile floor. "Como..." I squinted, trying to roll the word around in my brain. "Lluvia? Snow?"

"No, *nieva* is snow," my mother said, switching back to English. "You said rain."

"Rain is pretty, too."

"Yes, it can be. Y esto es muy hermoso."

"Como su hija." The woman looked at my mother, still smiling. "Diez?"

My mother looked only once at the tablecloth before nodding. "Si."

We didn't see any other shops like the lace shop, though. With each street, more trash lined the roads, the paint grew more chipped and faded, and bars on the windows and doors grew thicker. We wandered back to the main plaza, but the increasing shadows had changed the city. I held my father's hand tightly, watching the different figures that lounged in the shadows, watching us pass. Behind us, a bottle smashed against the street, and I snapped my head around. My father scooped Jesse into his left arm and pulled me forward again, handing me over to Mom so he could move more quickly.

The plaza was quieter when we hit the red stone tiles again. Most of the tourists were gone, retreating to their homes or to the cantinas that were bulging with the bodies of *los barrachos*. The children hung on the street corners, watching the tourists go, their hands and pockets stuffed with bright strands of color.

We slowed when we reached the red tile, within sight of the arches, and my mother stopped to buy me a bracelet, since Jesse had gotten a wooden horse at one of the first stores. Children surrounded us, holding out handfuls of bracelets like prayers. Those that could speak English were calling their wares like ringmasters, while the others whispered, "*brazaletes, Señora,*" or simply stared at us with wide brown eyes. The larger ones pushed the littler ones aside as they jockeyed for a position closer to the tourist.

"Pretty bracelets, Lady. You buy some for your girl?"

Mom hadn't expected this. She looked them over and bought three from the smaller children who had been pushed out of the circle. The sight of money brought more children, and mother waved them away with some kind words in Spanish and a gentle but persistent shake of her head. I was glad when we moved away.

One boy came up, thrusting a handful of beads into Mom's hands before stepping back a foot or so. Mom tried to tell him no and give him the bracelets back, but he ran away further. "No. You buy. One dollar."

The Spanish flew back and forth, angry, churning streams of sounds that flashed through my ears too quickly for me to catch anything but a couple words. He refused to come any closer, insisting that she buy the bracelets.

I hated the boy, and I hated his stupid bracelets. We waited, tied to the square as the boy stood a dozen yards off. The little baubles of color were now handcuffs. My mother couldn't leave without the boy calling her a thief, but he ran further out whenever she started toward him.

A storekeeper finally drifted over, curious. I waited, watching as the storekeeper joined the cajoling. Finally, the man took the hated bracelets, freeing my mother and me. Afraid he might lose his stock, the boy came over, but we didn't wait to see. My father had already started walking when the boy called after my mom. "Putá! Putá sucia!"

My mouth opened in a little 'o', shocked, even as my mother's hands clamped firmly over my ears to block out the rest. She turned back to yell something at the boy, twisting my head around with her. The other children had scattered, afraid that the white woman would call la policia on the nasty street urchins. The boy who had called my mother such names had his back to us now as he sprinted into the shadows. Her hands still clasped tightly over my ears, my mother and the shopkeeper were left standing in the street, their shadows climbing the walls of the gray adobe buildings.

As we moved back over the bridge, the smell of outhouses grew stronger. I couldn't smell the fajitas anymore, only the tequila bottles that lay smashed on the road. My feet were tired and sore, but I was too big to carry, so I held my Mom's hand while the guard waved us through the gate and we walked up the road. The bright beads, once so colorful, now seemed cheap and gaudy around my wrist. I kept on hearing the words the boy screamed at my mother. I leaned over to look at the bag my mother carried, gingerly reached in and touched the tablecloth that lay wrapped in plastic and brown paper.

At the campsite that night, Jesse and I played with another family that had girls about my age. I gave them my bracelets.

