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Her favorite tree was a gnarled, wind-whipped higuierón perched on the hillside right above their house. Teodolinda leaned against the rough trunk and gazed at the distant, cloud-covered mountain range. Somewhere up there was Zapotal—the strange new place her dad had been talking about lately. *Will we really move up there?* she wondered.

In the distance she heard the yigüirro* trilling his melancholy song. She knew that when Costa Rica's national bird sang, he was calling in the rains. Although it was only April, still a month before rainy season, the yigüirro was getting impatient. Just like her dad, who was impatient to move to Zapotal before the rains came.

Teodolinda turned and looked toward the lowlands. Just below her, half hidden behind the steep bank, their little house clung to the hillside like a hump on a camel's back. The house was built simply, with a grass-thatched roof, board walls, and a dirt floor. But it was home.

*clay-colored robin



Beyond the house on the hillside lay the coastal plain, then beyond that the ocean, wrapped in the afternoon haze. San Ramón had been her home for years.

Teodolinda had just turned seventeen. She was dressed in simple Tico (Costa Rican) garb—a modest light blue cotton dress with an elastic waist. Her hair was done up in a simple bun. Her hands were almost as rough as the higerón's bark from all the work in the house and on the farm. Most of Teodolinda's friends and neighbors thought she should have married already. But though she had plenty of suitors,

Teodolinda was not ready to settle down and marry yet. She was not sure she was ready to move to Zapotal either.

As Teodolinda rested her tired, work-worn body against the tree trunk, her mind traveled back to her childhood. Sadness washed over her as she recalled her grandmother's death. She could still hear herself screaming, "*¡Yo quiero ir! ¡Yo quiero ir!*" (I want to go!) . . .

Her parents would not let her go along to the *vela*.^{*} She loved Grandma so much. She wanted to go along to the *vela* and to the burial so badly. But her mamilla, Angelina, did not think it would be good for her to see the dead. "Stay at home and be good," she snapped. "Take good care of the children."

Teodolinda stayed home, but she cried for a long time. Then she decided she would feel better if she worked. Besides, little Avelino was hungry. And she was feeling hungry herself. Though only five years old, she already knew how to work.

Teodolinda stirred the dying coals on the hearth, added a few pieces of firewood, and got the fire going again. Then she found the wooden block her father Ramón had made for her to stand on to work in the kitchen. She placed the block right next to the corn grinder that was fastened to the *molendero*.^{**} Next she got a cup and ran to the big kettle full of cooked corn. She filled her cup, jumped up on her block, and started to crank the handle of the grinder. It was way too big for her, but she had done it before. She dropped only a few kernels of cooked corn into the grinder at a time. She knew that if she put in too many, the machine would choke, and she would not be strong enough to make the handle go around.

Grinding corn a few kernels at a time was a very slow process, but soon a little dab of corn dough formed in the pan under the grinder. As soon as there was enough to make one tortilla, Teodolinda took it and patted it out on the *molendero*. It did not turn out nearly as nice as her mama's did, so she got a cup and placed it upside down on the flattened dough and pushed it down hard. It cut out a neat, round disk. A small

* all-night watch after a death

** long, wide board used as a work table

tortilla fit for a king! Satisfied, she fried it on the clay skillet. Avelino ate the first tortilla, the baby the next one, and then Avelino ate the third one. Finally, sweaty and hot, Teodolinda got to eat the last two. Then she put the babies to bed and cried herself to sleep . . .

* * *

Teodolinda brushed aside the tears that had come with the memory. She was still leaning against the tree, staring out over the gulf. Now that her daydreaming spell was broken, Teodolinda was surprised that her mother had not missed her yet and called her in. She scrambled up into the branches of her favorite tree and, nestling down among its strong, rough limbs, allowed her mind to wander again.

Another day worked its way into Teodolinda's memory—the frightening day of the ambush . . .

Whenever her father had spare time, he worked for their neighbor Gabriel. Though Gabriel was not extremely rich, he was considerably wealthier than Ramón. Gabriel was always willing to help Ramón out when he was in a pinch, and Ramón always gave him a good day's work for his wage, so they became fast friends.

One day Gabriel asked Ramón to take his place on his weekly Saturday run into town to sell produce and buy groceries. Ramón took Teodolinda along, and they drove Gabriel's nice pair of spotted oxen and his fancy cart to San Ramón early in the morning, returning in the late afternoon. Ramón, as usual, stopped at the saloon and bought several drinks, so on the way home he was tipsy, though not drunk.

The sun was lying low in the west. As the oxcart bumped along slowly, Teodolinda was surprised to hear her father singing at the top of his voice. She hung on in the back of the cart, seven years old and so happy that she had gotten to go along to town. But now she was tired, and if not for the bumping of the cart, she would have fallen asleep.

About half a mile from Gabriel's farm gate, the road climbed a short hill to a lonely plateau. At the top of the hill the road curved and ran through a patch of high weeds before it plunged down the other side and on to Gabriel's farm. The oxen slowed way down as they plodded

up the hill. It had grown dark, and Ramón had stopped singing. He had bowed his head low, thinking. Teodolinda was dozing.

As the oxen finally topped the hill, a bloodcurdling yell jolted them from their dreams. Three men burst out of the weed patch, yelling and brandishing their *cutachas*.^{*} The oxen stopped. Ramón only had time to jump off the front of the cart and extend his ox goad. He had forgotten his *cutacha*.

To Ramón's surprise, one of the frenzied men shouted, "Gabriel, get up and defend yourself! Today you are going to die!"

Ramón stood his ground and brandished his long ox goad, holding his attackers at bay. Everything was happening way too fast.

Teodolinda stood petrified in the back of the cart. The oxen cringed, but were too weary to bolt. All the while Ramón was swinging his goad, his mind was racing. *These must be the Jiménez boys, he thought. They are Gabriel's mortal enemies and have sworn to kill him. They think he is coming home from his Saturday run to San Ramón.*

Then it dawned on Ramón, *They think I'm Gabriel!* "I am Ramón Soto!" he screamed. "I am not Gabriel!"

The men were working their way closer in spite of Ramón's strong swing. Just as Ramón screamed, one of the swinging *cutachas* caught his thumb right where it grasped the hard goad pole and clipped it completely off.

Ramón's screams finally sank into the angry men's brains and they stopped in horror. They had the wrong man pinned against the front of the cart. And he was wounded. That was enough—they turned and fled.

Teodolinda was jumping up and down in the back of the cart, shrieking, "Papito, you are going to die! Papito, you are going to die!"

Ramón stared at his bleeding hand and shook his head grimly. He reached over with his other hand and grabbed the stub to stop the blood. "Be quiet!" he told Teodolinda. "I am not going to die. They only cut off my thumb. That was close, though! Hey, Teo, just be glad they

* thin machetes used as weapons, often carried at the waist in a sheath