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# 1

## The Dust Storm

TINA BACKED AWAY as Mom yanked the heavy wooden table away from the wall. Grabbing her little sister Lena's hot, sticky hand, she pulled her to join Lisa at the other end of the long kitchen. Fearfully, the girls watched their mother.

"You don't have to be scared, children," Mom slurred. But still five-year-old Tina huddled with her sisters, watching as Mom lifted a shaking foot to climb onto the bench against the wall behind the table. Lena whimpered.

"Mom, you will fall!" warned seven-year-old Lisa. She jumped forward as her mother teetered on the narrow board.

Catching her balance, Mom scowled. "I am not a baby. I need to see this calendar. Go back to Lena!" She licked a finger and began tracing the month and the year slowly. She grasped the bottom of the calendar as though it might give her some stability.

"One, nine, seven, seven; one, nine, seven, seven; 1977," Tina heard her mutter. "Abram was born in 1965... in '65—" The calendar could hold her grasp no longer, and the hole by which it hung from a nail ripped suddenly. "Stupid calendar!" She cursed as she stepped down gingerly, still clutching the paper. She plunked down on the bench and pulled the table toward her. She counted on her fingers. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... Abram is twelve

years old today.” She laid her arms on the table and wept, her sobs broken by her vicious nose-blowing into the hankie she pulled from her ample dress sleeve.

The children watched solemnly for a moment, but knowing all too well what would follow, they wasted no time getting out the door. Lisa picked up the crying Lena and shooed Tina out ahead of her. They hurried across the windswept yard.

“What about the baby?” Tina worried, holding onto her straw hat as the wind attempted to tear it from her head. With one hand, she jerked at the pink ribbon, hoping to undo old knots.

The children reached the chicken barn and huddled in a tight, uncertain knot behind its adobe block walls.

“I’ll go check on him soon,” Lisa whispered. “Maybe Mom won’t drink much more. I think the last bottle is almost empty.”

Tina sighed and nodded. “Yeah, this morning when Gerhard cried, Mom quit drinking. And now we got out on time, so she won’t get mad at us.” With a small stone Tina smoothed the dust at her sandaled feet, her chin resting on her raised knees. “I’m glad we have a baby,” she added.

Lisa set Lena on the ground. “Why? I’m not glad. He makes more work. Now that Susana always has to work outside in the fields or for the neighbors, the boys are never in the house, and now I have to do all the work.”

Tina studied her face. “But... maybe... maybe Mom will quit drinking since she has a baby.”

“Nope, she won’t,” Lisa declared. “Why, our baby is getting bigger; and the bigger he gets, the more she drinks. Dad too.”

“Is she mad because we have a baby?” In Tina’s mind the baby and the drinking were connected. But why, when baby Gerhard was getting cuter every day?

“I think it’s something about our brother Abram.” Lisa sighed deeply, looking old. “And I know one thing for sure—it would help if Dad would quit bringing drink home.” They were no longer whispering now that they were far enough from the house that Mom would not demand they return immediately. “Lena is happy now. And look, here are the boys! Frank and Johan, let’s play hide-and-seek. Johan, you’re ‘It’!”

“Why are you girls sad?” asked Frank, their oldest brother.

Lisa shrugged. “Mom.” Then she added, “Come on, let’s play.”

Glad for a distraction from her parents’ drinking problem, Tina joined the game, laughing and shouting with her siblings. The wind blew around them, creating dust devils that left whirly designs on the dusty yard. The gale picked up steadily, but the children didn’t notice.

Wind was common in the La Honda Old Colony Mennonite villages of Zacatecas, Mexico—as common as the red soil that the tidy housewives swept out of their houses every day. No one thought much about it unless the two elements—wild wind and light soil—combined to make a real dust storm.



Tina’s childhood home in La Honda. At that time the house was simple adobe. Photo taken c. 2014.

The rising wind blew dust and corn stubble into Tina’s face, and little Lena began to cry as the chaff whipped her tender skin. Tina,

still hiding, ignored her. But Lisa, responsible big sister that she was, stopped the game to check on Lena's complaints. Suddenly she called, "Frank! Johan! Tina! Come, we have to go into the house. There's a big storm coming!"

Tina and her brothers emerged from their hiding places. Their eyes turned to where Lisa was pointing. A towering brown cloud was rushing off the hills behind their village, Campo 17, and heading straight for them.

"Run!" Frank cried. "It's coming fast!" He grabbed Tina's hand and dragged her toward the house, while Lisa struggled with Lena's weight in the relentless gusts.

The tin door was rattling wildly. When Johan reached up to unlatch it, Frank shouted, "Hold it tight! Open it slowly or it will rip from the frame!" Frank stood beside the door to help brace it. As soon as it was open a crack, he motioned for the girls to slip inside.

The girls found Mom still at the table, her head on her arms. She sniffed twice and then raised her head. "Why do you come in with such a racket, children?"

Tina flinched. Mom's voice was slurred and quiet, but there was no love or friendliness in it. No one answered. Instead they all stood in a solemn row against the door, hoping Mom would not turn on them or disappear into the bedroom.

Her face streaked with tears, Mom raised herself heavily from the bench and spoke again. "Why are you boys here? Where is Susana?"

"We found some beans!" Johan's face lit up. "I'll go get them!"

Frank grabbed his younger brother by his overall straps. "It's too stormy out there! Wait!"

"Let me go! I'm hungry!" Johan pled.

"Now don't go tearing those overalls." Mom's voice grew harsh. "It's easy to see they're worn out. Stop pulling!"

Johan looked at his ragged pants that were much too short and stopped pulling. “But let me get the beans we picked! What if that beggar Camarón finds them? I saw him at the end of the village! I did!” Again, Johan headed for the door, and this time Frank followed him.

A few minutes later, the boys clattered inside again, pushing with all their might to close the door against the tornado-like wind. A swirl of dust entered the kitchen. Even Mom smiled as they laid the dusty bag on the wooden kitchen table. Dumping the brown pinto beans onto the table, she began sorting the chaff and tiny pebbles from the small pile.

Tina sighed, relieved to see Mom working. Mom was not mean by nature, and sometimes she was almost kind—when she wasn’t drinking.

“Where is Susana?” Mom asked again.

“She said she will be home soon,” Frank answered. “She has another bag of beans.”

“More beans?” Tina smiled. “Mom, maybe we won’t be hungry all week.” She had no idea how many beans it would take to feed them all, but until Dad got home with money to buy groceries, they would have nothing to eat except the beans and corn they could scrounge from their neighbor’s harvested fields.

“You still did not say where your sister is.” Mom flicked away a piece of straw.

Frank shrugged. “I don’t know. She just said she’s coming soon.”

Mom sighed and wiped her face with dusty hands. Mom looked so old and worried, Tina thought. She stepped closer, wishing she could climb into her mother’s lap. She loved Mom, but she was also afraid.

Mom stood and reached to fill the tin dipper from the water bucket to wash the beans. She didn’t seem to notice Tina as she rinsed the beans again and again.