

TATA MILAGRO



A Modern Parable

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**To
Barbara and Mario
on the occasion of their
wedding**

... no one knows the Son except the Father;
nor does anyone know the Father except the Son,
and anyone to whom the Son will to reveal *Him*.

Matthew 11.27

Cover Graphic: The Cathedral Church of Todos Santos, BCS.

I felt the usual tightness in my chest when the shapes of the individual mesquite trees and bulky cardóns became defined in their rush past my passenger window. In my mind's eye, I pictured the petite airport at Santa Anita just a mile ahead and felt glad the Alaska Airlines' pilots were good at getting in and out of short landing strips. Then I laughed at my mental wavering. On take-off I'd told myself it would be great if the plane crashed. I'd be better off dying in a ball of fire, I'd thought, than in a medicated stupor. But remembering my earlier thoughts now filled me with remorse. The selfishness of such a death wish at the expense of a plane load of vacationers!

Naturally, I guess, my brain tumor was never far from my mind. How could it be? I only had a few months to live. I had looked forward to this last excursion of my life, but I would gladly have missed it if an accident had saved me from the coming excruciating crawl into oblivion. Not that I wanted anyone else to get hurt — God forbid! As the ground rose up to meet us, I was just intrigued by my different perspective on this trip. So many times I'd felt the nervous stab in the chest as my flights had taken off or landed, but now all fears paled before the certainty that I would soon begin to lose my ability to think, and then would swiftly lose all touch with reality and finally with life itself. *God, I thought, if I have to die, why can't it be suddenly, without this horrible anticipation?*

Hold it right there, Ruben, I said to myself. You're not going to plunge yourself into another depression. You're going to play your part well for the next week, or this trip is going to be a pitifully disgusting note on which to end your life. Dr. Quinn told you to do the most fulfilling thing you could think of while you still had time, and this is it. Don't make it a waste.

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Thump, THUMP, Whoosh! The plane landed perfectly, of course, coming to a full stop at the very end of the runway, then making its funny, wheel-cranking, U-turn and taxiing back to the terminal. Dong! dong! The “fasten seat belts” lights blinked out and the 727 unleashed another gang of gringo tourists on Los Cabos.

I’d not come to the cape for the fishing, and partying like so many others. My destination lay up in the hills, a short distance to the north of the tourist towns. I was going to my family’s ancestral home, the little ranch community where my grandfather had been born, as had his father and grandfather. While still capable of traveling, I had chosen to visit once more the desert haven I had come to love through the years of exploring my family’s roots.

And I hoped to coax one more anecdote out of some old rancher to add to my collection of rural myths. I was dying just like the desert ranchers’ way of life, but I had distilled that fading lifestyle into a collection of stories and anecdotes that would outlive us both. My publisher awaited my final chapter, promised for the end of the month. All the legal papers had been signed for distributing the proceeds of the posthumous publication. All I needed to do now was to capture my final thoughts and feelings as I said good-bye to the ranch, and put them into words that would touch someone else’s soul. I would preserve cultural gems in writing, and in so doing preserve a part of myself and make my own life more than a statistic.

But first, there was Miguel’s wedding in Todos Santos that night. The wedding was what helped me decide to take the Doctors advice. I would have just finished the book with what I had, and then become a hermit for the final days, but I’d grown close to my cousin Miguel over the years, and when I’d gotten the good news that Anita had finally said *yes* — well, I couldn’t miss the celebration. It would be a joyous time with all my friends and relatives, and no one would know that this would be the last time, except me. They’d receive letters soon enough, but for now they wouldn’t suffer the awkwardness of trying to know what to say to me.

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But never mind about that now. This story really begins at the wedding reception, a few hours after my plane landed. Having enjoyed all the pomp and color of a ceremony in the grand cathedral church of Todos Santos, the crowd of well-wishers walked behind the wedding party in their decorated convertible for the two blocks to the town park. The odors of pork roasting over a mesquite fire and the sound of mariachis tuning up quickened our steps. The crowd swarmed like locusts around the food tables, the musicians launched into their endless repertoire of old favorites, and the festivities got into full swing. It was after only three dance numbers though, that Cousin Martín, having come down from the hills wearing his Sunday best, called out that he wanted to make the first toast to the bride and groom. As dancers caught their breath and gratefully accepted plastic glasses of beer or tequila, Martín cleared his throat and spoke through the static of the PA system: “To Miguel and Anita, may you always love as you love tonight, and may you one day meet Tata Milagro and have all your dreams come true!”

That “Tata Milagro” line caught my ear, and I hardly heard the cheers and laughter that followed Martín’s toast. In all my years of exploring my family heritage and encouraging aged patriarchs and matriarchs to regal me with their stories of the region’s history and culture, I’d never heard of anyone called Tata Milagro, “Grandpa Miracle.” I took my Uncle Hector aside to a park bench that was away from the blaring speakers. Hector was as uncomfortable on the dance floor as I was, and I knew he’d be glad of an excuse to step away from it and the rolling eyes of forward widows. Besides, he had always seemed to enjoy educating me about his world. “Uncle,” I began, “who is Tata Milagro? I don’t remember you ever telling me about a Tata Milagro.”

“No?” he replied. “He is a legend — how should I say — a story, you know, of an old man who grants wishes.”

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“Oh, so he’s not a real person,” I said. “Uncle, when Martín said that part about ‘dreams coming true,’ I thought, *ah*, perhaps this is another regional folktale.”

I expected a nod of agreement from Hector, but he just looked back at me steadily, as though expecting me to go on. Maybe he hadn’t heard me. “So, it’s just a myth, right?” I said a little louder.

I startled Hector out of some inward reverie. “Yes,” he said, “I suppose so, but there are those who would swear that Tata Milagro really exists. Your grandfather’s aunt Louisa, who died last winter, claimed to have met him.”

“Of a truth?” I said, using that Spanish phrase that half asks, and half exclaims. “So people even think he lived around here?”

“According to the legend, he lives everywhere. He wanders the earth, and one never knows when they may meet him. The story says that those who meet him — and recognize him — can have any wish granted. That’s why they call him Tata Milagro. He has the power to grant any wish. The difficulty is in finding him and recognizing him to claim your wish.” Hector’s grin broadened over his gleaming dentures as he finished this synopsis.

“Wonderful,” I said. Here it was. I would go home with a great story to cap off my collection, and it would tie into my concluding exhortation to remember the hearty desert rancher and the lessons of his character. The last line of my book would be, “This is my wish.”

“Do you know anyone else who claims to have met Tata Milagro,” I asked.

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Hector gave his short little “embarrassed” laugh, the kind he gave when he felt that my late Aunt Beatriz would disapprove of him finding any humor in the subject under discussion. “Have you never seen Chuy, El Joven?” he asked. “The firewood seller, the one who looks like a boy?”

The name Chuy rang a bell. “Is he the one who sold me kindling for the water heater last winter?”

“Probably. He’s the picture of youth, poor thing.”

“What?”

“He’s in his thirties,” Hector continued, “but he’s malito, he has some condition that does not allow his body to grow up. They say he is destined to live his life looking like a boy. The girls tease him mercilessly, but poor thing, no woman would dream of marrying him. They couldn’t stand to grow old while their husband remained looking so young!”

“Who are his family,” I asked.

“Well that’s the point. He lives in a shack behind Doña Sara’s place, but he’s an orphan. Illegitimate, I think. But to answer your question, he claims that Tata Milagro is his father.”

I was awakened the next morning by Cousin Jorge banging on the door of my rented house. I rolled onto my side to pick my watch up from the night stand. 9:45 AM. I pulled on my jeans and walked barefoot over the cold tile floor to open the front door. Jorge, perfectly groomed and dressed for work, stood on the front porch

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and grinned at me as he noted my state of undress and my untamed hair. He straightened his tie and said, “Good Morning, lazy bones, your uncle says to hurry down to the house if you want your fried eggs this morning! He sends you the message that life is too short to sleep away the best hours of the day.”

If only Uncle Vicente knew how short my life was, he wouldn't begrudge me the pleasure of sleeping in after a party, I thought. Oops! Be careful. I caught myself again. *No self-pity, Ruben, no downer thoughts.* I nodded and waved good-bye to Jorge who was already half way down the drive, and then I went through the house to the back yard and lit the water heater for my morning shower. Uncle Vicente, Jorge's father, was a retired professor and frowned upon laziness of any kind whether physical or grammatical. But he was also my second best source of cultural insight, and I loved him dearly. I was glad Jorge had awakened me because I was eager to ask Uncle Vicente what he knew about Chuy and Tata Milagro.

“It's a fairy tale,” said Uncle Vicente, after I'd popped my questions and started into my fried eggs. “Every culture needs a Tata Milagro. He is a symbol of hope.”

“Chuy seems to have latched onto that hope in a tenacious way,” I commented. “You never told me about his claim to fame. I want to interview him this morning.”

“Well,” Uncle Vicente sniffed, “I suppose Chuy *is* part of our local color, but we usually don't boast about our handicapped. He has a sickness you know. He doesn't age physically, at least not outwardly. I think his body is aging internally and he'll die unexpectedly one day. The real problem is his delusion, though. I didn't think you'd be interested in his fantasies.”

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“Uncle,” I said, “you know how I’ve collected the local legends over the years. I want to record this one about Tata Milagro. If Chuy claims to know him, I’d like to talk to him, just to fill out the story.”

“Fine,” said Uncle Vicente as he folded his napkin on the table and got to his feet. “I have some business to attend to, but your aunt will tell you how to get to Doña Sara’s.”

Everywhere in Todos Santos is within walking distance, so after thanking Aunt Doris profusely for breakfast, I went directly to Doña Sara’s, my notebook in hand. “Come in, come in,” cackled the old woman, her lips drawn in over toothless gums. “Come drink coffee and eat some beans.” I could smell the tempting aroma of fresh tortillas wafting through the cracks between the cardón planks of her cooking shack.

“Thank you very much,” I said, “but Aunt Doris just fed me to the bursting point. Actually, I’m looking of Chuy; is he in?”

“No, no,” she said, shaking her finger at me, correcting me as though we’d been arguing. “He gathers firewood in the morning. He won’t be back here until two in the afternoon.”

“Ai!” I said voicing my disappointment. “I’m going to my Uncle Hector’s ranch today, but perhaps I can wait and leave later this afternoon. I very much want to talk to Chuy.”

“Yes, he’s an interesting one to talk to — if he chooses to be,” Sara said with a toothless grin. “Won’t you have just a little coffee.”

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“No, truly,” I said, “Not right now. But thank you. Tell me, Doña Sara, is it true that Chuy thinks he is the son of Tata Milagro?”

The old woman thrust her lips out in a tight pucker and squinted, looking me in the eye long and hard. Then she said, “If Chuy no longer lived in this town, I would do nothing but talk about him the whole day, but while he lives among us, it is best to let him speak for himself. You come back at two and let him answer your questions.”

I decided to use the mid-day hours to do what I had planned to do later in the week, namely, visit my pals around town for the last time. I went to Bruno’s corner grocery first. It had been at that ancient brick building where they’d christened me with the nickname *Washington*. Bruno, and the old men who stood around his doorway to gossip, had laughed heartily the first time they heard me pronounce the name of my home state — I guess I’d accented the wrong syllable. I had the last laugh, though, because they were sure I was from the American capital. When I arrived, Bruno’s business was bustling as usual, but as soon as he saw me he gave the familiar holler: “Guashingtone!” We joshed back and forth for a few minutes, while his young cashier kept the brown sugar, eggs, bananas and salted fish moving across the new Formica counter. Then I told Bruno he was a good friend, and wished him continuing prosperity. “Perhaps you will meet Tata Milagro,” I said, wondering if that would draw any interesting comment from him. He just winked and waved good-bye, so I walked the next two blocks to the bank.

At the BancoMex I got in line to cash a traveler’s check and traded comments on the previous night’s celebration with the bank guard and the manager, the latter of whom leaned back in the chair behind his desk, with his hands joined behind his

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head. These men were part of the furniture. There'd been no change of personnel in the bank for all the years I'd been visiting Todos Santos. "Great dance last night," I said.

"Wasn't it?" agreed Louis the manager. "I didn't see you dancing though!" "No, after Martin's toast I was looking around for Tata Milagro," I said with mock earnestness.

"Ha, I met Tata Milagro one time," said Louis (with a grin that assured me he was pulling my leg). "He offered me the choice between money and sex appeal."

"And what did you choose?" I asked, taking his bait.

"Sex appeal obviously. That's why I still have to work here every day and why the women of this town come to make so many deposits!"

BancoMex must be grateful, I thought, as the woman ahead of me in line giggled, and the guard broke into a wide grin. I could see I wasn't going to get any serious mythology from Louis.

When my turn at the counter came I greeted Arnaldo the teller by name. Through the years, I'd seen him graduate from a hand-cranked adding machine, to an electronic calculator and now to a classy computer screen. The equipment had changed but he hadn't. He kept eye contact with me while his hands, the right one with the bulging muscle above the wrist, counted out a hundred dollars' worth of pesos. He wished me an enjoyable vacation. I thanked him for his excellent service and didn't bother to recount my stack of pesos as I waved good-bye to him and his colleagues.

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My next stop was to see Paco at the Hotel California, then Eduardo at the electric shop, and then to the park for a shrimp cocktail with Pancho the taxi driver. At each stop I introduced the subject of Tata Milagro to see what kind of response I would get, but I learned little more than I knew already. Two o'clock came quickly.

Back at Doña Sara's, I was struck by how handsome Chuy was: the jet black hair, the strong chin, the perfect skin, the broad shoulders. I hadn't really paid attention to him the year before when he'd brought wood to the rental house. *He must be a frustration to the girls*, I thought. *So good looking but his very looks are intimidating if he never ages*. "How can I serve you, Señor?" he said to me. *He's got good manners*, I noted; fewer and fewer young people in town felt obligated to call strangers *Señor*.

"Chuy," I began, "My uncle Hector told me the story of Tata Milagro, and I would like to write the story in a book. My uncle thought you might be able to tell me more."

Chuy looked at me intently, as he gestured toward a plastic chair that stood on the packed earth in front of his shack. His eyes seemed to bore into me, but not with irritation or anger. On the contrary, though his expression was serious, there was a wild joy sparkling in those eyes. I sensed he knew that I'd been told more about his supposed connection to Tata Milagro than I was letting on. I sat down and was about to blurt out something stupid to break the tension when Chuy spoke first.

He leaned comfortably against the post of his open door, and said, "*Tata Milagro* is what the people of this region call my father. He is very old. He is all wise, and all good. He comes here to Todos Santos at times, but He does not live here. He travels always."

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“Is it true that Tata Milagro can grant wishes?” I asked.

“Yes, whether it is the answer to a question, or a healing of the body or anything else.”

I felt an inward jolt when Chuy said “healing of the body.” I blinked hard and inwardly shoved my emotions back down. *It’s not true*, I reminded myself. *We are only discussing a local myth, and sadly, a young man’s personal fantasy*. The last thing I needed now was to catch a delusion that would raise my hopes of beating this tumor. I’d seen so many of my fellow cancer patients clutch eagerly at any rumor of a new cure, only to plunge into a hellish depression as their hopes faded. That was not going to happen to me. There was no such thing as a Tata Milagro. I was here to finish my book, say good-bye to my beloved heritage and go home to face the end. *Get back to business*, I told myself, *if any of this legend were true, this man in front of you would be healed and leading a normal life!*

“Chuy,” I asked, “how old are you?”

I could see by his eyes that he knew the point of this question, but he answered good-naturedly. “Thirty-three years, by the calendar.”

Thirty-three! He might pass for twenty-one *at most*. He had the skin of a baby, no beard at all, nor a single blemish, and built like a well-muscled teenager. “Have the doctors given a name to your, uh, illness?” I asked.

“You refer to my eternal youth,” said Chuy. “Since when is youth an illness?” My mouth flopped open, but before I could say anything, Chuy continued. “When my Father and I first came to Todos Santos, we understood that we could not live together as other families do. If He stayed in one place, it would become the center

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of the world, for all people would come to him. The cities of the world would empty as people came to the man who could grant their greatest or most desperate wishes. We knew that He must go to the people rather than let the people try to come to Him — besides, He does not grant the wishes of all people, only of those people whom he chooses, and those are the ones he visits. We understood that if I settled in one place for a time, we would have to separate. This was a great sadness to us, for we love one another. And so, to console me before He left, He asked me to make a wish. ‘Father,’ I said, ‘you have already given me everything of true worth. Still, I must work very hard while you are away, and so I ask you to give me lasting youth of body and the strength of a man in his prime.’ My father gave me this blessing.” Chuy paused, then said, “And now, Señor, you know more about me and Tata Milagro than most of the people in this town know.”

I squirmed in the molded plastic yard chair, my mind in turmoil. Chuy told his story with conviction, relaxed but with certainty. I stared at him. He didn’t act like a mental patient. He didn’t have the eyes of a psychotic. He seemed perfectly normal and healthy — too healthy; he was just too old for his looks. But he was standing there making impossible claims. Could they be true? The question shot into my mind as though from a gun at my temple. *No!* I almost said out loud. *Get a grip, Ruben, finish up this business!*

With forced calm, I followed up on Chuy’s last statement. “Why have you told *me* these things?” I asked.

“Because you wish to know, and most of the town’s people do not,” he said.

“Chuy, forgive me, but I don’t think most of the town believes in Tata Milagro.”

“It is very hard for people to believe in what they have not seen.”

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That was a rational statement, and Chuy's tone carried no judgment. "Tell me," I said, "how would one recognize Tata Milagro if they *did* see him?"

Chuy's eyes fastened on me again, burning into mine. Finally he spoke. "I will tell you the truth. My father appears in many different ways, sometimes as a business man, sometimes as a rancher, depending on the needs of those he visits. But look for these signs: his arms have the strength of a bull, but his hands are like the petals of a rose for softness; his jaw is hard like flint, but his eyes are like the eyes of a doe; his words burn like coals, but they are like aloe vera for the heart."

Chuy's conviction regarding his personal reality continued to disconcert me. "Chuy," I said, "over the years, other people must have asked you the question I just did. In spite of their doubts there must be many needy people who wish to recognize Tata Milagro should he cross their path."

"No," he replied. "Needy people abound in this town, but very few are willing to be seen as needy by their neighbors. Pride is a deadly thing, Ruben."

The sudden use of my given name flustered me even further. My eyes met Chuy's, but I lowered my gaze quickly and started to say good-bye. I was rattled. "One thing more," said Chuy, interrupting my mumbled thanks, "ask Tata Milagro about his son, and then you will know him with certainty."

The legend of Tata Milagro is made for a guy like me, I thought as I drove up the dusty road to Hector's ranch. It would be a dream come true to find someone who could answer any question a guy had. Man, have I had questions! And this Tata Milagro can also heal?

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I yanked my mind back to reality when I neared Hector's house and the white walls of the adjacent school building came into view through the trees and cacti. The one-room school hadn't been used since Hector's children had finished the sixth grade. As the new generation grew up, they left for jobs in the city, and now too few children were born on the ranches to give this edifice purpose. *That's what I'll be soon*, I thought, *a once bustling building with no more thinking going on inside.*

Another moment and I was driving into Hector's yard. *Okay, Ruben*, I said to myself, *plenty of time to feel sorry for yourself later. Now you're at one of your favorite places on earth, so be happy and don't waste this time.* I climbed out of the car, looking around for the dogs, but none came to greet me. I walked over to the corral fence, as a family of pigs scurried away from me in a cloud of dust. The mule was gone. That told me that Hector was watering the tomatoes at his garden a couple of kilometers up the arroyo, or perhaps tracking down a missing cow. I turned and looked to the west. There were still a couple hours of daylight, time enough to visit El Capitán.

El Capitán was a long-vanished community, named for its founder, a man who had once captained a tall ship. The tiny village had stood on a little plateau a kilometer away and a couple hundred feet above the present collection of buildings around Hector's place. Nothing remained of El Capitán but a dozen rectangles of foundation stones, marking where the houses had stood; that and scattered potsherds in the gravelly dirt. As I climbed the steep path to the ancient site, joy welled up within me. I loved this place, and it was good to get some vigorous exercise too. I got to the plateau and sat down on one of El Capitán's larger cornerstones in the shade of a mesquite tree that had grown up in what had once been the center of a bedroom, according to the ranch lore. I took a deep breath and looked around at the ruins. My eyes fell on a mound of fresh dirt just twenty feet away, by the foundation stones of the long-gone Martinez house. *More*

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treasure hunters, I thought. The ranchers loved to talk about gold buried under the floors of the houses that had once stood here, but no one had ever found anything in El Capitán but broken pottery or bits of porcelain from the head or hands of an antique doll.

Of course I'd found treasures at El Capitán, but of a different sort. I'd found a peace up here that was unattainable in the city. Even now as I sat still and listened to the doves cooing and the distant clangs of cowbells, I felt stress drain from my body and relaxation creep in like a drug. I lifted my eyes to the panorama surrounding El Capitán's plateau. Below me to the right I could see the white school building and Hector's house, along with the other houses of the ranch community peeking through the greenery, with an occasional palm tree rising above the canopy. Straight ahead the arid hills rolled away to the north, ridge after ridge, ending in purple mountain peaks on the horizon. On my left, where the arroyo cut through the hills, I could see the distant white line that defined the shore of the Pacific Ocean and the faint sparkle on the horizon that showed where blue sky met blue water. Behind me the ridge of El Capitán continued to climb toward the mountains of Land's End.

I smiled and took another deep breath. I was pleasantly surprised by the fragrance of mesquite smoke lacing the oxygen-rich air. I inhaled again. Someone was cooking nearby. I stood and looked up the ridge. I didn't see anyone, but decided to look around the ruins that were further up. I walked past the scattered remains of one of my ancestor's homes, and then ducked under some thorny bushes that had overgrown the path. I stepped into the clearing where lay the ruins of the once grandiose Marianna house, and there he was, sitting on the ground leaning against the foundation stones, and cooking. He rose to greet me. "Come, young man," he said, "I've just roasted two doves, one for me and one for you."

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Who was this? At first glance I thought it was Uncle Joaquín — in the doghouse again, forced to camp out on the ridge while his wife fumed and threw pans in her kitchen down below. But then I saw that this was an old man I'd never met before. He wore no beard, but his mustache, like his hair, was the color of snow. The skin of his face was richly tanned, and deeply lined but otherwise unblemished. His eyes arrested me because though they were ever so alert, they brimmed with kindness. I didn't think he knew me, but he had the aggressive friendliness and hospitality so typical of the hill ranchers. Could he be a descendant of one of the ghosts of El Capitán just as I was? I would enjoy finding out.

I introduced myself and then squatted on my haunches near the small pile of glowing coals. The old man did not introduce himself in turn but lifted the spit from its rack and held the meat in the air away from the fire to cool. "Perhaps you knew my grandfather," I offered, glancing at the steaming morsels he held aloft.

"Yes, I know him well," he said.

"Well, he died a few years ago in San Lucas," I clarified.

"Yes, I attended the wake. Your grandfather was a restless man for most of his life, but he found a good woman in the end."

Before I could ask another question the old man began to tell me things about my relatives and ancestors I'd never been able to dig out of other people's memories, and he spoke as though he were an eyewitness to all that he recounted, and as if all that he recounted had occurred yesterday. As he pulled a dove off the spit and leaned toward me to hand it to me, I noticed how broad his shoulders were, how tight the sleeves of his old khaki shirt were at his biceps and then, as I took the roasted game, I noticed how smooth was the skin of his hands. I remembered to ask the old man who he was, but he was talking again. I held the dove in both hands

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but my mind was searching my pockets for a pen and a bit of paper. Who was this man? He had known my grandfather and his family intimately. How ironic that I should meet such a rich source of information at the very end of my quest to discover who *I* was.

“Eat,” he was saying as his words broke back into my thoughts. “I have a little wine to wash it down with. Let’s eat this food that God has provided, and then I will answer your questions.” I guess he could see the questions in my eyes. Anyway, we ate together in silence for a couple minutes. Peeling the tender bits of meat from the bones of a dove doesn’t take long. I finished first and tossed the bones under a cactus where some dog or coyote would enjoy them later.

“May I ask your name, Señor?” I inquired.

“Some call me El Viento,” he said tossing his bones aside and pulling a bottle from a rucksack on the ground. *That’s his nickname*, I said to myself. I’d learned long ago that everyone has a nickname in Mexico. “They call me El Viento,” the old man continued, “because like the wind I’m always traveling.”

I felt an inward jolt. I looked again at the man’s face. His dark eyes still projected kindness, gentleness even, and yet his jaw was strong and firm like Chuy’s. My eyes flicked down to his soft hands. *Get off it*, I said to myself. *Man, you are fantasizing, succumbing to wishful thinking. Get real and find out what you can from this grandfather!* “Do you know why my grandfather went north?” I asked.

“He impregnated a minor and was fleeing a forced marriage.”

I was stunned by this bit of news. I thought my father was the first born of his generation. “So I have an aunt or uncle older than my father?” I asked.

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“An aunt, but she died as an infant, an accident of children playing with a gun.”

I frowned at the tragedy so tersely evoked. “Why must innocent children die?” I wondered out loud.

“To be saved from a worse tragedy,” the old man said.

I looked at him in surprise. I got up from where I was squatting and sat down on the old foundation. I had just mumbled one of the great rhetorical questions of all time and “El Viento” had answered it matter-of-factly with astounding certainty in his voice. Something within me wanted to take offense, but the old man had not spoken with arrogance, just certainty. “Señor,” I said, “I can see that you have observed much over the years. I myself am facing a tragedy soon. What can you tell me about death?”

“It is the second most important event of every person’s life,” El Viento replied without hesitation. “You are wise to prepare for it.”

How did he know I was the one who was going to die? It bothered me that I had given away my secret, but part of me desperately wanted to talk about it. “I do not wish my relatives to know about this yet,” I said, “but if you don’t mind me asking, do you think I have wasted my life, never having married, never having had children?”

“Only his life is wasted who has never loved.” No hesitation, no disclaimers, and yet no haughtiness, only a sincere and certain answer to my question, and one that burned in my heart. My mind flew over the broken relationships that littered my past, and in that instant all was clear to me. Those relationships had all been ruined

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by one thing: my selfishness, the fact that I hadn't really loved. But I had learned to love at last. My people in Mexico had given me more than they would ever realize, but I had also given my love to them. I had at last become a giver instead of a taker. I didn't have to wonder anymore if my life had meant anything. I had loved; therefore my life had not been wasted.

Before I knew it I was asking the old man question after question in rapid succession. I exhausted my well of curiosity about family history and went on to Mexican and then European history. From history I came back to philosophy and from philosophy to science. "What is the universe made of?" I asked. I was thinking of the books I'd read lately that mixed physics with philosophy, but I didn't know how to say "quantum" in Spanish. Not a problem. Nothing stumped El Viento, nothing even made him hesitate.

"The passionate thoughts of God," he said.

I had never heard a person speak like this. Each of El Viento's assertions penetrated. It was as though each had a life of its own and continued to burrow into my soul after my brain had tried to file it in a comfortable compartment. So many of the things El Viento told me made me frown at first, even making me want to become defensive and argue. Each time, however, after a few moments reflection, I had to admit to myself that his statements made a profound kind of sense. Like now. Five words and he was bringing me face to face with the ultimate reality of the universe. He was telling me that there was a God, but more than that, a God who cared, a God who passionately held everything together. The implications of that overwhelmed me.

Who was this man? How could he know so much and yet I *not know him*? During my previous visits, neither Hector nor Vicente had ever told me about this man. I

Tata Milagro

had never heard of — my mind stopped in mid thought. I *had* heard of a man like this. From Chuy. But it couldn't be true, could it?

I looked up at the sky. The stars now shown like a field of diamonds above us. I had no idea how late it was. El Viento had held me in a spell for hours and I had hardly noticed as he had tended the fire and held back the chilliness of a night in the hills. I looked back at the old man's face, glowing mahogany in the light of the fire. "Do you have a son?" I asked.

He didn't answer instantly this time. He stood to his feet and raised his hands to the stars. "Blessed am I," his voice rang out, "to be the father of my son!" His words echoed back to us from the ridges to the north. Hector and the other families in their houses below had to have heard that shout, unless they were very soundly asleep. El Viento looked down at me and the firelight reflected wet streaks running down from his eyes.

"Are you Tata Milagro?" I asked.

"You know that I am," he said.

"MOOOOO!" I jolted awake. A black and white cow stood six feet away staring at me with a big prickly cholla segment stuck to her face. Where was I? Oh, yeah. I shielded my eyes as I looked toward Hector's house and the sun rising just above it. Wait, had I been dreaming? No, the ashes of the fire were still smoking. The bones from the dove still lay at the base of that cactus. I stood stiffly and looked around. No one there among the ruins but me.

Tata Milagro

I laughed as I ran down the trail to Hector's house. I had hit the jackpot. I had found a treasure. Everything was right with the world. I had joy, I had — I stopped in my tracks. My heart suddenly dropped into my stomach. I had talked *with Tata Milagro* and I hadn't asked him to heal me! My vision blurred for moment, but then re-focused. My heart rose; it could not stay down. "It doesn't matter!" I shouted at the dogs coming to meet me. I started running again. *It doesn't matter*, I said to myself. *I'm ready for the future now.*

I'd been home a month and the book was safely in the publisher's hands. All the loose ends of my life had been tied up. Now I simply enjoyed each day as it came, recognizing each moment of consciousness and mental clarity as the gift that it was. My mind did not *seem* to be going yet, but I faithfully kept my doctor's appointments as scheduled. I happened to be reaching for my phone when it rang.

"Hi, Ruben, this is David Quinn. Ruben, you know the MRI we did over? It came out just like the first one. I didn't tell you why we needed the repeat, but we did it because the first one didn't show the tumor. Ruben, we can't find a tumor anywhere! I can't explain this, but ... well, after all we've gone through based on my original diagnosis ... I don't know what to say. I feel guilty, I feel like I should give you a refund or something."

"Hallelujah!" I shouted. "Doc, I'll get back to you. I've got to make a call!" I tore open my address book and dialed the international number to Uncle Vicente's house. I held my breath as the call went through. Then the buzz-buzz of the Mexican phone.

"Bueno?" It was Vicente.

Tata Milagro

“Uncle,” I said, “it’s Ruben.”

“Well, hello,” he started in jovially, “how are things in the north country?”

“Uncle,” I said, “I need to talk to Chuy el Joven. Does Doña Sara have a phone by any chance, or is it possible to talk to him on your phone a little later?”

“I’m sorry to tell you that Chuy is no longer around,” Vicente said, his voice now sobered. “It’s a tragic thing, but they say he was murdered.”

“Murdered?” I gasped.

“Well, it’s only a rumor really. Pancho the taxi driver swears that he saw Chuy el Joven last Sunday night. He says Chuy was on the beach near San Jose, surf fishing with some other guys and that he was very much alive. Who knows? He’s definitely gone from here though. Frankly I think it’s just as well. No one ever knew who he was or where he came from, the poor...”

“Uncle,” I interrupted, “Let me tell you who he is.”

THE END