

NANCY FARMER

The House of the Scorpion



Dear Book Lover,

I am writing to say hello, eight years after my retirement as a children's book publisher. Unofficially, I still work on a few books a year. Here is one I love particularly, and here is why:

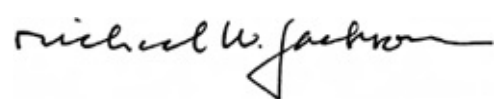
Most fiction answers an overarching question: What does it mean to be human? In *Lord of Opium*, Nancy Farmer's sequel to her National Book Award-winning *of the Scorpion*, the hero becomes human, right before our eyes. Literally, figuratively. At age fourteen. The two books together, separated by just a minute from the end of the first to the start of the second, can be seen as a metaphor for adolescence. But they needn't be. Together—or even singly—they deliver one whale of a story.

My pleasure has been to edit Nancy's fiction since we met years ago—if “edit” is the word. Usually, as in *The Lord of Opium*, I see first a completed manuscript. I may want for an extra scene or two—as I did for this story. But each book comes to me essentially done, thoroughly imagined and understood. It's only when I can't understand a connection or miss a bit of backstory that I ask for more. And always that more (maybe only a word or maybe a scene of several pages) helps to resolve my query. Two new sections of *Lord of Opium* came after the original—only two, really—and Nancy inserted them in unexpected places; not where I'd jotted a margin note or anticipated something new. Reading her work is therefore an ongoing amazement. She amazes me always with her wit; sense of pace and place; her serious concern for the fate of the world; and the zest that she finds in a wide cast of characters, not just the wonderfully wicked, but the good as well.

I think you will be amazed, too, at *The Lord of Opium*.

For readers wanting to track Matteo Alacrán from his harvesting as a clone raised for body parts, I recommend beginning with *The House of the Scorpion*. The title of that first book was suggested by an early reader of the manuscript, Nancy Farmer's friend (and mine), Ursula K. LeGuin. In a prepublication blurb she wrote: “It is a pleasure to read science fiction that's full of warm, strong characters—people who are really fond of one another, children who are ignorant and vulnerable, powerful evildoers whom one can pity, good people who make awful mistakes. It's a pleasure to read science fiction that doesn't rely on violence as the solution to complex problems of right and wrong. It's a pleasure to read science fiction that gets the science right. It's a pleasure to read *The House of the Scorpion*.”

Besides the National Book Award, the novel was named a Newbery Honor Book and a Michael L. Printz Honor Book for excellence in young adult literature. Not bad for a being grown in and cut out of a cow.



Richard Jackson
Editor, Richard Jackson Books

NANCY FARMER



**the house of the
scorpion**

A Richard Jackson Book
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Reading Group Guide

'The Lord of Opium' Excerpt

About Nancy Farmer

To Harold for his unfailing love and support, and to Daniel, our son. To my brother, Dr

Elmon Lee Coe, and my sister, Mary Marimon Stout.

Lastly, and no less importantly, to Richard Jackson, *il capo di tutti capi* of children's book editors.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE ALACRÁN FAMILY

- Matt:** Matteo Alacrán, the clone
El Patrón: The original Matteo Alacrán; a powerful drug lord
Felipe: El Patrón's son; died long ago
El Viejo: El Patrón's grandson and Mr. Alacrán's father; a very old man
Mr. Alacrán: El Patrón's great-grandson; husband of Felicia, father of Benito and Steven
Felicia: Mr. Alacrán's wife; mother of Benito, Steven, and Tom
Benito: Oldest son of Mr. Alacrán and Felicia
Steven: Second son of Mr. Alacrán and Felicia
Tom: Son of Felicia and Mr. MacGregor
Fani: Benito's wife

VISITORS AND ASSOCIATES OF THE ALACRÁNS

- Senator Mendoza:** A powerful politician in the United States; father of Emilia and María; also called Dada
Emilia: Oldest daughter of Senator Mendoza
María: Younger daughter of Senator Mendoza
Esperanza: Emilia's and María's mother; disappeared when María was five
Mr. MacGregor: A drug lord

SLAVES AND SERVANTS

- Celia:** Chief cook and Matt's caregiver
Tam Lin: Bodyguard for both El Patrón and Matt
Daft Donald: Bodyguard for El Patrón
Rosa: Housekeeper; Matt's jailer
Willum: Chief doctor for the Alacrán household; Rosa's lover
Mr. Ortega: Matt's music teacher
Teacher: An eejit
Hugh, Ralf, and Wee Wullie: Members of the Farm Patrol

PEOPLE IN AZTLÁN

- Raúl:** A Keeper
Carlos: A Keeper
Jorge: A Keeper
Chacho: A Lost Boy
Fidelito: A Lost Boy; eight years old
Ton-Ton: A Lost Boy; driver of the shrimp harvester
Flaco: Oldest of the Lost Boys
Luna: Lost Boy in charge of the infirmary

Guapo: Old man celebrating *El Día de los Muertos*

Consuela: Old woman celebrating *El Día de los Muertos*

Sister Inéz: A nurse at the Convent of Santa Clara

MISCELLANEOUS CHARACTERS

Furball: María's dog

El Látigo Negro: The Black Whip, an old TV character

Don Segundo Sombra: Sir Second Shadow, an old TV character

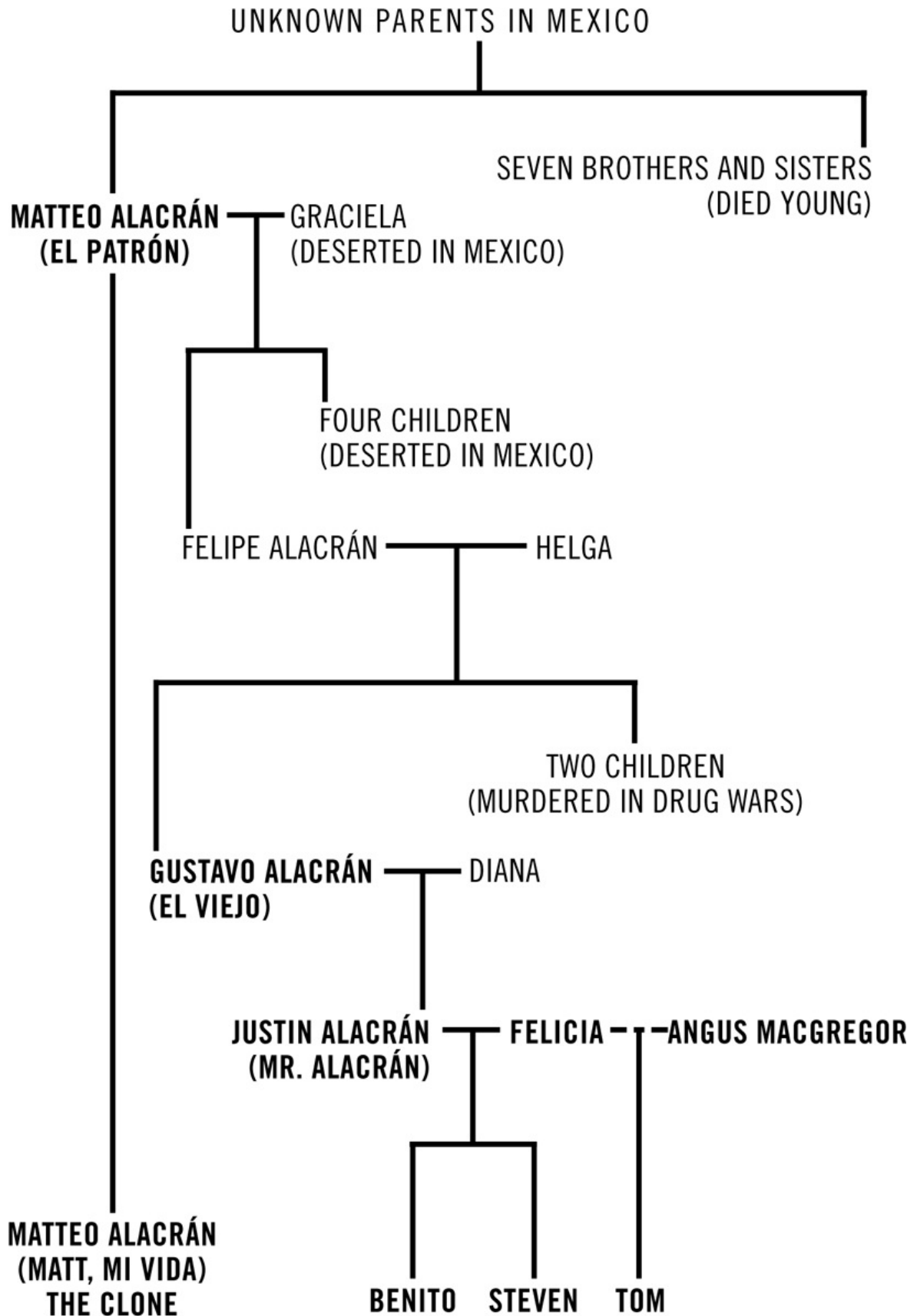
El Sacerdote Volante: The Flying Priest, an old TV character

Eejits: People with computer chips in their brains; also known as zombies

La Llorona: The Weeping Woman; mythical woman who searches in the night for her lost children

Chupacabras: The goat sucker; mythical creature that sucks the blood out of goats, chickens, and, occasionally, people

ALACRÁN FAMILY HISTORY



BOLD TYPE = LIVING

LIGHT TYPE = DECEASED



YOUTH:

0 TO 6



IN THE BEGINNING

In the beginning there were thirty-six of them, thirty-six droplets of life so tiny that Eduardo could see them only under a microscope. He studied them anxiously in the darkened room.

Water bubbled through tubes that snaked around the warm, humid walls. Air was sucked into growth chambers. A dull, red light shone on the faces of the workers as they watched their own array of little glass dishes. Each one contained a drop of life.

Eduardo moved his dishes, one after the other, under the lens of the microscope. The cells were perfect—or so it seemed. Each was furnished with all it needed to grow. So much knowledge was hidden in that tiny world! Even Eduardo, who understood the process very well, was awed. The cells already understood what color hair it was to have, how tall it would become, and even whether it preferred spinach to broccoli. It might even have a hazy desire for music or crossword puzzles. All that was hidden in the droplet.

Finally the round outlines quivered and lines appeared, dividing the cells in two. Eduardo sighed. It was going to be all right. He watched the samples grow, and then he carefully moved them to the incubator.

But it wasn't all right. Something about the food, the heat, the light was wrong, and the man didn't know what it was. Very quickly over half of them died. There were only fifteen now, and Eduardo felt a cold lump in his stomach. If he failed, he would be sent to the Farms, and then what would become of Anna and the children, and his father, who was so old?

"It's okay," said Lisa, so close by that Eduardo jumped. She was one of the senior technicians. She had worked for so many years in the dark, her face was chalk white and her blue veins were visible through her skin.

"How can it be okay?" Eduardo said.

"The cells were frozen over a hundred years ago. They can't be as healthy as samples taken yesterday."

"That long," the man marveled.

"But some of them should grow," Lisa said sternly.

So Eduardo began to worry again. And for a month everything went well. The day came when he implanted the tiny embryos in the brood cows. The cows were lined up, patiently waiting. They were fed by tubes, and their bodies were exercised by giant metal arms that grasped their legs and flexed them as though the cows were walking through an endless field. Now and then an animal moved its jaws in an attempt to chew cud.

Did they dream of dandelions? Eduardo wondered. Did they feel a phantom wind blowing tall grass against their legs? Their brains were filled with quiet joy from implants in their skulls. Were they aware of the children growing in their wombs?

Perhaps the cows hated what had been done to them, because they certainly rejected the embryos

One after another the infants, at this point no larger than minnows, died.

~~Until there was only one.~~

Eduardo slept badly at night. He cried out in his sleep, and Anna asked what was the matter. He couldn't tell her. He couldn't say that if this last embryo died, he would be stripped of his job. He would be sent to the Farms. And she, Anna, and their children and his father would be cast out to walk the hot, dusty roads.

But that one embryo grew until it was clearly a being with arms and legs and a sweet, dreaming face. Eduardo watched it through scanners. "You hold my life in your hands," he told the infant. As though it could hear, the infant flexed its tiny body in the womb until it was turned toward the man. And Eduardo felt an unreasoning stir of affection.

When the day came, Eduardo received the newborn into his hands as though it were his own child. His eyes blurred as he laid it in a crib and reached for the needle that would blunt its intelligence.

"Don't fix that one," said Lisa, hastily catching his arm. "It's a Matteo Alacrán. They're always left intact."

Have I done you a favor? thought Eduardo as he watched the baby turn its head toward the bustling nurses in their starched, white uniforms. *Will you thank me for it later?*



THE LITTLE HOUSE IN THE POPPY FIELDS

Matt stood in front of the door and spread his arms to keep Celia from leaving. The small, crowded living room was still blue with early morning light. The sun had not yet lifted above the hills marking the distant horizon.

“What’s this?” the woman said. “You’re a big boy now, almost six. You know I have to work.” She picked him up to move him out of the way.

“Take me with you,” begged Matt, grabbing her shirt and wadding it up in his hands.

“Stop that.” Celia gently pried his fingers from the cloth. “You can’t come, *mi vida*. You must stay hidden in the nest like a good little mouse. There’re hawks out there that eat little mice.”

“I’m *not* a mouse!” Matt yelled. He shrieked at the top of his voice in a way he knew was irritating. Even keeping Celia home long enough to deliver a tongue-lashing was worth it. He couldn’t bear being left alone for another day.

Celia thrust him away. “*¡Callate!* Shut up! Do you want to make me deaf? You’re just a little kid with cornmeal for brains!” Matt flopped sullenly into the big easy chair.

Celia immediately knelt down and put her arms around him. “Don’t cry, *mi vida*. I love you more than anything in the world. I’ll explain things to you when you’re older.” But she wouldn’t. She had made the same promise before. Suddenly the fight went out of Matt. He was too small and weak to fight whatever drove Celia to abandon him each day.

“Will you bring me a present?” he said, wriggling away from her kiss.

“Of course! Always!” the woman cried.

So Matt allowed her to go, but he was angry at the same time. It was a funny kind of anger, for he felt like crying, too. The house was so lonely without Celia singing, banging pots, or talking about people he had never seen and never would see. Even when Celia was asleep—and she fell asleep easily after long hours cooking at the Big House—the rooms felt full of her warm presence.

When Matt was younger, it hadn’t seemed to matter. He’d played with his toys and watched the television. He’d looked out the window where fields of white poppies stretched all the way to the shadowy hills. The whiteness hurt his eyes, and so he turned from them with relief to the cool darkness inside.

But lately Matt had begun to look at things more carefully. The poppy fields weren’t completely deserted. Now and then he saw horses—he knew them from picture books—walking between the rows of white flowers. It was hard to tell who rode them in all that brightness, but it seemed the riders weren’t adults, but children like him.

And with that discovery grew a desire to see them more closely.

Matt had watched children on television. He saw that they were seldom alone. They did things together, like building forts or kicking balls or fighting. Even fighting was interesting when it meant you had other people around. Matt never saw anyone except Celia and, once a month, the doctor. The

doctor was a sour man and didn't like Matt at all.

Matt sighed. To do *anything*, he would have to go outdoors, which Celia said again and again was very dangerous. Besides, the doors and windows were locked.

Matt settled himself at a small wooden table to look at one of his books. *Pedro el Conejo*, said the cover. Matt could read—slightly—both English and Spanish. In fact, he and Celia mixed the two languages together, but it didn't matter. They understood each other.

Pedro el Conejo was a bad little rabbit who crawled into Señor MacGregor's garden to eat up his lettuces. Señor MacGregor wanted to put Pedro into a pie, but Pedro, after many adventures, got away. It was a satisfying story.

Matt got up and wandered into the kitchen. It contained a small refrigerator and a microwave. The microwave had a sign reading PELIGRO!!! DANGER!!! and squares of yellow notepaper saying NO! NO! NO! NO! To be extra sure, Celia had wrapped a belt around the microwave door and secured it with a padlock. She lived in terror that Matt would find a way to open it while she was at work and “cook his little gizzards,” as she put it.

Matt didn't know what gizzards were and he didn't want to find out. He edged around the dangerous machine to get to the fridge. That was definitely his territory. Celia filled it with treats every night. She cooked for the Big House, so there was always plenty of food. Matt helped himself to sushi, tamales, pakoras, blintzes—whatever the people in the Big House were eating. And there was always a large carton of milk and bottles of fruit juice.

He filled a bowl with food and went to Celia's room.

On one side was her large, saggy bed covered with crocheted pillows and stuffed animals. At the head was a huge crucifix and a picture of Our Lord Jesus with His heart pierced by five swords. Matt found the picture frightening. The crucifix was even worse, because it glowed in the dark. Matt kept his back to it, but he still liked Celia's room.

He sprawled over the pillows and pretended to feed the stuffed dog, the teddy bear, the rabbit (*conejo*, Matt corrected). For a while this was fun, but then a hollow feeling began to grow inside Matt. These weren't real animals. He could talk to them all he liked. They couldn't understand. In some way he couldn't put into words, they weren't even *there*.

Matt turned them all to the wall, to punish them for not being real, and went to his own room. It was much smaller, being half filled by his bed. The walls were covered with pictures Celia had torn out of magazines: movie stars, animals, babies—Matt wasn't thrilled by the babies, but Celia found them irresistible—flowers, news stories. There was one of acrobats standing on one another in a huge pyramid. SIXTY-FOUR! the caption said. A NEW RECORD AT THE LUNAR COLONY.

Matt had seen these particular words so often, he knew them by heart. Another picture showed a man holding a bullfrog between two slices of bread. RIBBIT ON RYE! the caption said. Matt didn't know what a ribbit was, but Celia laughed every time she looked at it.

He turned on the television and watched soap operas. People were always yelling at one another on soap operas. It didn't make much sense, and when it did, it wasn't interesting. *It's not real*, Matt thought with sudden terror. *It's like the animals*. He could talk and talk and talk, but the people couldn't hear him.

Matt was swept with such an intense feeling of desolation, he thought he would die. He hugged himself to keep from screaming. He gasped with sobs. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

And then—and then—beyond the noise of the soap opera and his own sobs, Matt heard a voice calling. It was clear and strong—a child's voice. And it was real.

Matt ran to the window. Celia always warned him to be careful when he looked out, but he was so

excited that he didn't care. At first he only saw the same, bleached blindness of the poppies. Then a shadow crossed the opening. ~~Matt recoiled so quickly, he fell over and landed on the floor.~~

"What's this dump?" someone said from outside.

"One of the worker's shacks," said another, higher voice.

"I didn't think anyone was allowed to live in the opium fields."

"Maybe it's a storeroom. Let's try the door."

The door handle rattled. Matt squatted on the floor, his heart pounding. Someone put his face against the window, cupping his hands to see through the gloom. Matt froze. He had wanted company, but this was happening too quickly. He felt like Pedro el Conejo in Señor MacGregor's garden.

"Hey, there's a kid in here!"

"What? Let me see." A second face pressed against the window. She had black hair and olive skin like Celia. "Open the window, kid. What's your name?"

But Matt was so terrified, he couldn't squeeze out a single word.

"Maybe he's an idiot," the girl said matter-of-factly. "Hey, are you an idiot?"

Matt shook his head. The girl laughed.

"I know who lives here," the boy said suddenly. "I recognize that picture on the table."

Matt remembered the portrait Celia had given him on his last birthday.

"It's the fat old cook—what's her name?" the boy said. "Anyhow, she doesn't stay with the rest of the servants. This must be her hangout. I didn't know she had a kid."

"Or a husband," the girl remarked.

"Oh, yeah. That explains a lot. I wonder if Father knows. I'll have to ask him."

"You will not!" the girl cried. "You'll get her into trouble."

"Hey, this is my family's ranch, and my father told me to keep an eye on things. You're only visiting."

"It doesn't matter. *My* dada says servants have a right to privacy, and he's a United States senator, so his opinion is worth more."

"Your dada changes his opinions more often than his socks," the boy said.

What the girl replied to this, Matt couldn't hear. The children were moving away from the house, and he could make out only the indignant tone of her voice. He was shivering all over, as though he'd just met one of the monsters Celia told him haunted the world outside, the *chupacabras* maybe. The *chupacabras* sucked your blood and left you to dry like an old cantaloupe skin. Things were happening too fast.

But he had liked the girl.

• • •

The rest of that day Matt was swept by both fear and joy. He had been warned by Celia never, never to show himself at the window. If someone came, he was to hide himself. But the children had been such a wonderful surprise, he couldn't help running to see them. They were older than he. How much older Matt couldn't tell. They were definitely not adults, though, and they didn't seem dangerous. Still, Celia would be furious if she found out. Matt decided not to tell her.

That night she brought him a coloring book the children had thrown away in the Big House. Only half of it had been used, so Matt spent a pleasant half hour before dinner using the stubby crayons Celia had brought on other occasions. The smell of fried cheese and onions drifted out of the kitchen, and Matt knew she was cooking Aztláno food. This was a special treat. Celia was usually so tired when she returned home, she only heated up leftovers.

He colored in an entire meadow with green. His crayon was almost gone, and he had to hold it carefully to use it at all. ~~The green made him feel happy. If only he could look out on such a meadow instead of the blinding white poppies.~~ He was certain grass would be as soft as a bed and smell like rain.

“Very nice, *chico*,” said Celia, looking over his shoulder.

The last fragment of crayon fell apart in Matt’s fingers.

“*¡Qué lástima!* I’ll see if I can find more in the Big House. Those kids’re so rich, they wouldn’t notice if I took the whole darn box.” Celia sighed. “I’ll only take a few, though. The mouse is safest when she doesn’t leave footprints on the butter.”

They had quesadillas and enchiladas for dinner. The food sat heavily in Matt’s stomach.

“*Mamá*,” he said without thinking, “tell me again about the kids in the Big House.”

“Don’t call me ‘*Mamá*,’ ” snapped Celia.

“Sorry,” said Matt. The word had slipped out. Celia had told him long ago that she wasn’t his real mother. The children on TV had *mamás*, though, and Matt had fallen into the habit of thinking of Celia that way.

“I love you more than anything in the world,” the woman said quickly. “Never forget that. But you were only loaned to me, *mi vida*.”

Matt had trouble understanding the word *loaned*. It seemed to mean something you gave away for a little while—which meant that whoever *loaned* him would want him back.

“Anyhow, the kids in the Big House are brats, you better believe it,” Celia went on. “They’re lazy as cats and just as ungrateful. They make big messes and order the maids to clean them up. And they never say thank you. Even if you work for hours making special cakes with sugar roses and violets and green leaves, they can’t say thank you to save their miserable little souls. They stuff their selfish mouths and tell you it tastes like mud!”

Celia looked angry, as though the incident had happened recently.

“There’s Steven and Benito,” Matt reminded her.

“Benito’s the oldest. He’s a real devil! He’s seventeen, and there isn’t a girl in the Farms who’s safe from him. But never mind that. It’s adult stuff and very boring. Anyhow, Benito is like his father, which means he’s a dog in human clothing. He’s going to college this year, and we’ll all be glad to see the last of him.”

“And Steven?” Matt said patiently.

“He’s not so bad. I sometimes think he might have a soul. He spends time with the Mendoza girls. They’re okay, although what they’re doing with our crowd would puzzle God Himself.”

“What does Steven look like?” It sometimes took a long time to steer Celia to the things Matt wanted to know—in this case, the names of the children who’d appeared outside the window.

“He’s thirteen. Big for his age. Sandy hair. Blue eyes.”

That must have been the boy, thought Matt.

“Right now the Mendozas are visiting. Emilia’s thirteen too, very pretty with black hair and brown eyes.”

That must be the girl, Matt decided.

“She at least has good manners. Her sister, María, is about your age and plays with Tom. Well, some might call it play. Most of the time she winds up crying her eyes out.”

“Why?” said Matt, who enjoyed hearing about Tom’s misdeeds.

“Tom is Benito times ten! He can melt anyone’s heart with those wide, innocent eyes. Everyone falls for it, but not me. He gave María a bottle of lemon soda today. ‘It’s the last one,’ he said. ‘It’s really cold and I saved it especially for you,’ he said. Do you know what was in it?”

“No,” said Matt, wriggling with anticipation.

~~“Pee! Can you believe it? He even put the cap back on. Oh, she was crying, poor little thing. She never learns.”~~

Celia suddenly ran out of steam. She yawned broadly and fatigue settled over her right before Matt's eyes. She had been working from dawn to well after dark, and she had cooked a fresh meal at home as well. “I'm sorry, *chico*. When the well's empty, it's empty.”

Matt rinsed the plates and stacked the dishwasher while Celia took a shower. She came out in her voluminous pink bathrobe and nodded sleepily at the tidied table. “You're a good kid,” she said.

She picked him up and hugged him all the way to his bed. No matter how tired Celia was—and sometimes she almost fell over with exhaustion—she never neglected this ritual. She tucked Matt in and lit the holy candle in front of the statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She had brought it with her all the way from her village in Aztlán. The Virgin's robe was slightly chipped, which Celia disguised with a spray of artificial flowers. The Virgin's feet rested on dusty plaster roses and Her star-spangled robe was stained with wax, but Her face gazed out over the candle with the same gentleness it had in Celia's bedroom long ago.

“I'm in the next room, *mi vida*,” whispered the woman, kissing the top of Matt's head. “You get scared, you call me.”

Soon the house shook with Celia's snores. To Matt, the sound was as normal as the thunder that sometimes echoed over the hills. It in no way kept him from sleep. “Steven and Emilia,” he whispered, testing the words in his mouth. He didn't know what he would say to the strange children if they appeared again, but he was determined to try to talk to them. He practiced several sentences: “My name is Matt. I live here. Do you want to color pictures?”

No, he couldn't mention the coloring book or the crayons. They were stolen.

“Would you like some food?” But the food might be stolen too. “Do you want to play?” Good. Steven and Emilia could suggest something, and Matt would be off the hook.

“Do you want to play? Do you want to play?” he murmured as his eyes closed and the gentle face of the Virgin of Guadalupe floated in the candlelight.



PROPERTY OF THE ALACRÁN ESTATE

Celia left in the morning, and Matt spent the entire day waiting for the children. He had given up hope when, just before sunset, he heard voices approaching through the poppy fields.

He planted himself in front of the window and waited.

“There he is! See, María, I told you I wasn’t lying,” cried Emilia. Her hand rested on the shoulder of a much smaller girl. “He won’t talk to us, but you’re about his age. Maybe he won’t be afraid of you.” Emilia pushed the girl ahead of her and fell back to wait with Steven.

María wasn’t at all shy about coming up to the window. “Hey, boy!” she yelled, rapping the glass with her fist. “What’s your name? Do you want to play?”

With one blow, she stole Matt’s carefully prepared speech. He stared at her, unable to think of another opening.

“Well, is it yes or no?” María turned toward the others. “Make him unlock the door.”

“That’s up to him,” said Steven.

Matt wanted to say he didn’t have the key, but he was unable to get the words out.

“At least he isn’t hiding today,” remarked Emilia.

“If you can’t unlock the door, open the window,” María said.

Matt tried, knowing it wouldn’t work. Celia had nailed the window shut. He threw up his hands.

“He understands what we say,” said Steven.

“Hey, boy! If you don’t do something quick, we’re going away,” María shouted.

Matt thought desperately. He needed something to interest them. He held up his finger, as Celia did when she wanted him to wait. He nodded his head to show that he agreed with María’s demand and was about to *do something*.

“What does that mean?” said Emilia.

“Beats me. Maybe he’s a mute and can’t talk,” Steven guessed.

Matt raced to his bedroom. He ripped the picture of the man with the bullfrog sandwich from the wall. It made Celia laugh. Maybe it would make these children laugh. He ran back and pressed the newspaper against the window. The three children came close to study it.

“What’s it say?” asked María.

“ ‘Ribbit on Rye,’ ” read Steven. “Do you get it? It’s a bullfrog going *ribbit, ribbit, ribbit*, and it’s between two slices of rye bread. That’s pretty funny.”

Emilia giggled, but María looked uncertain. “People don’t eat bullfrogs,” she said. “I mean, not when they’re *alive*.”

“It’s a joke, dum-dum.”

“I’m not a dum-dum! It’s mean and nasty to eat bullfrogs! I don’t think it’s funny at all.”

“Save me from eejits,” said Steven, rolling his eyes.

“I’m not an eejit, either!”

“Oh, lighten up, María,” Emilia said.

~~“You brought me out here to see a boy, and it was miles and miles across the fields, and I’m tired and the boy won’t talk. I hate you!”~~

Matt stared at the scene with consternation. That wasn’t the result he wanted at all. María was crying, Emilia looked angry, and Steven had turned his back on both of them. Matt rapped on the window. When María looked up, he waved the picture and then wadded it into a ball. He threw it with all his force across the room.

“See, he agrees with me,” cried María through her tears.

“This is getting weirder by the minute,” said Steven. “I knew we shouldn’t have brought the eejit.”

“I thought the boy would talk to a kid his own size,” Emilia said. “Come on, María. We have to get back before dark.”

“I’m not walking anywhere!” The little girl flopped down on the ground.

“Well, I won’t carry you, fatso.”

“Just leave her,” said Steven. He started walking off, and after a moment Emilia followed him.

Matt was appalled. If the big kids went away, María would be all alone. It was going to be dark soon, and Celia wouldn’t return for hours. María would be alone with nothing but the empty poppy fields and the . . .

The *chupacabras*, who came out after dark and sucked your juices and left you to dry like an old cantaloupe skin!

Suddenly Matt knew what he had to do. María had walked a few steps away from the window before sitting down again. She was shouting insults at the vanished Steven and Emilia. Matt grabbed the big iron cooking pot Celia used to make *menudo* and swung it before he could worry much about her reaction. She would be furious! But he was saving María’s life. He smashed out the glass in the window. It fell in a tinkling, jangling mass to the ground. María jumped to her feet. Steven and Emilia rose up instantly from the poppy field, where they’d been hiding.

“Holy frijoles!” said Steven. All three stood openmouthed, staring at the empty hole where the window had been.

“My name is Matt. I live here. Do you want to play?” said Matt because he couldn’t think of another thing to say.

“He *can* talk,” said Emilia after the first shock had died away.

“Is that how you usually open a window, kid?” Steven said. “Stay back, María. There’s glass all over.” He stepped carefully to the opening and knocked out the remaining shards with a stick. Then he leaned inside to look around. Matt had to hold on to himself to keep from bolting to the other room. “This is creepy! The window’s nailed shut. What are you, some kind of prisoner?”

“I live here,” Matt said.

“You told us that already.”

“Do you want to play?”

“Maybe he’s like a parrot and only knows a few words,” suggested Emilia.

“I want to play,” said María. Matt looked at her with approval. The girl was struggling in Emilia’s arms, obviously trying to get to him. Steven shook his head and moved away. He looked like he was really going to leave this time.

Matt came to a decision. It was frightening, but he’d never had an opportunity like this before and he might never have it again. He shoved a chair to the opening, scrambled up, and jumped.

“No!” shouted Steven, running forward to catch him. He was too late.

A terrible pain lanced through Matt’s feet. He fell forward, and his hands and knees landed on the

shards of glass.

~~“He wasn’t wearing shoes! Oh, man! Oh, man! What’re we going to do!”~~ Steven pulled Matt up and swung him onto a clear patch of ground.

Matt stared with amazement at the blood dripping from his feet and hands. His knees sprouted rivulets of red.

“Pull out the glass!” cried Emilia in a high, scared voice. “María, stay away!”

“I want to see!” yelled the little girl. Matt heard a slap and María’s shriek of outrage. His head was swimming. He wanted to throw up, but before he could, everything went black.

• • •

He woke to the sensation of being carried. He was sick to his stomach, but worse than that his body was trembling in a frightening way. He screamed as loud as he could.

“Great!” panted Steven, who supported Matt’s shoulders. Emilia had his legs. Her shirt and pants were soaked with blood, *his* blood. Matt screamed again.

“Be quiet!” Steven shouted. “We’re running as fast as we can!”

The poppies, now blue in the long shadows of the hills, stretched away in all directions. Steven and Emilia were jogging along a dirt path. Matt’s breath caught with sobs. He could hardly get air.

“Stop!” cried Emilia. “We have to let María catch up.” The two children squatted down and let Matt’s weight rest on the ground. Presently, Matt heard the patter of smaller feet.

“I want to rest too,” demanded María. “It’s miles and *miles*. I’m going to tell Dada you slapped me.”

“Be my guest,” said Emilia.

“Everyone be quiet,” Steven ordered. “You’ve stopped bleeding, kid, so I guess you’re not in too much danger. What’s your name again?”

“Matt,” María answered for him.

“We aren’t far from the house, Matt, and you’re in luck. The doctor’s spending the night. Do you hurt a lot?”

“I don’t know,” said Matt.

“Yes, you do. You screamed,” María said.

“I don’t know what *a lot* is,” Matt explained. “I haven’t hurt like this before.”

“Well, you’ve lost blood—but not too much,” Steven added as Matt began to tremble again.

“It sure looks like a lot,” said María.

“Shut up, eejit.”

The older children rose, carrying Matt between them. María followed, complaining loudly about the distance and at being called an eejit.

A kind of heavy sleepiness fell over Matt as he was swayed along. The pain had died down, and Steven said he hadn’t lost too much blood. He was too dazed to worry about what Celia would say when she saw the broken window.

They reached the edge of the poppy fields as the last streaks of sunlight slid behind the hills. The dirt path gave way to a wide lawn. It was a shimmering green, growing deeper with the blue light of evening. Matt had never seen so much green in his life.

It’s a meadow, he thought, drowsily. And it smells like rain.

They started up a flight of wide, marble steps that shone softly in the darkening air. On either side were orange trees, and all at once lamps went on among the leaves. Lights outlined the white walls of a vast house above, with pillars and statues and doorways going who knew where. In the center of an archway was the carved outline of a scorpion.

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!” came a flurry of women’s voices as they swept down the stairs to lift Matt from Steven’s and Emilia’s arms.

• • •

“Who is he?” asked the maids. They were wearing black dresses with white aprons and starched, white caps. One of them, a severe-looking female with deep creases down either side of her mouth, carried Matt as the others went ahead to open doors.

“I found him in a house in the poppy fields,” replied Steven.

“That’s Celia’s place,” a maid said. “She’s too stuck-up to live with the rest of us.”

“If she’s hiding a child, I’m not surprised. Who’s your father, kid?” said the woman who was carrying Matt. Her apron smelled like sunlight, the way Celia’s did when it came straight from the clothesline. Matt stared at a pin fastened to the woman’s collar, a silver scorpion with its tail curved up. Beneath the scorpion was a name tag that said ROSA. Matt didn’t feel well enough to talk, and what did it matter who his father was, anyhow? He didn’t know the answer, either.

“He doesn’t talk much,” said Emilia.

“Where’s the doctor?” Steven said.

“We’ll have to wait. He’s treating your grandfather. At least we can clean the kid up,” said Rosa.

The maids opened a door to reveal the most beautiful room Matt had ever seen. It had carved wooden beams on the ceiling and wallpaper decorated with hundreds of birds. To Matt’s reeling eyes they seemed to be moving. He saw a couch upholstered with flowers that shaded from lavender to rose like the feathers on a dove’s wings. It was to this couch that Rosa was carrying him.

“I’m too dirty,” Matt murmured. He had been yelled at before for climbing on Celia’s bed with muddy feet.

“You can say that again,” snapped Rosa. The other women opened a crisp, white sheet and laid it over the wonderful couch before Matt was laid down. He thought he could get into just as much trouble for getting blood on that sheet.

Rosa fetched a pair of tweezers and began pulling out fragments of glass from his hands and feet. “Ay!” she murmured as she dropped the bits into a cup. “You’re brave not to cry.”

But Matt didn’t feel brave at all. He didn’t feel anything. His body seemed far away, and he watched Rosa as though she were an image on a TV screen.

“He sure screamed earlier,” observed María. She was dancing around, trying to see everything that happened.

“Don’t act so superior. You yell your head off if you get an itty-bitty splinter in your finger,” Emilia said.

“Do not!”

“Do so!”

“I hate you!”

“Ask me if I care,” said Emilia. Both she and Steven watched in fascination as blood began to well out of Matt’s cuts again. “I’m going to be a doctor when I grow up,” announced Emilia. “This is very good experience for me.”

The other maids had brought a bucket of water and towels, but they didn’t attempt to clean Matt up until Rosa gave them permission.

“Be careful. The right foot is badly cut,” said Rosa.

The air hummed in Matt’s ears. He felt the warm water and suddenly the pain returned. It stabbed from his foot all the way to the top of his head. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

His throat had closed with shock.

~~“Oh, God! There must be glass left inside,” cried Rosa. She grabbed Matt’s shoulders and ordered~~
him not to be afraid. She seemed almost angry.

The fogginess that had surrounded Matt had vanished. His feet, his hands, his knees throbbed with more pain than he had known existed.

“I told you he was crying earlier,” said María.

“Be quiet!” said Emilia.

“Look! There’s writing on his foot,” the little girl cried. She tried to get close, but Emilia thrust her back.

“*I’m* the one who’s going to be a doctor. Rats! I can’t read it. There’s too much blood.” She snatched a washcloth and wiped Matt’s foot.

The pain wasn’t as bad this time, but he couldn’t help moaning.

“You’re hurting him, you bully!” shrieked María.

“Wait! I can just make it out ‘Property of’—the writing is so tiny!—‘Property of the Alacrán Estate.’ ”

“ ‘Property of the Alacrán Estate’? That’s us. It doesn’t make any sense,” said Steven.

“What’s going on?” came a voice Matt hadn’t heard before. A large, fierce-looking man burst into the room. Steven immediately straightened up. Emilia and even María looked alarmed.

“We found a kid in the poppy fields, Father,” said Steven. “He hurt himself, and I thought the doctor . . . the doctor—”

“You idiot! You need a vet for this little beast!” the man roared. “How dare you defile this house?”

“He was bleeding—” began Steven.

“Yes! All over the sheet! We’ll have to burn it. Take the creature outside now.”

Rosa hesitated, obviously bewildered.

The man leaned forward and whispered into her ear.

A look of horror crossed Rosa’s face. She instantly scooped up Matt and ran. Steven dashed ahead to open the doors. His face had turned white. “How *dare* he talk to me like that,” he hissed.

“He didn’t mean it,” said Emilia, who was dragging María along behind.

“Oh, yes he did. He hates me,” Steven said.

Rosa hurried down the steps and dumped Matt roughly onto the lawn. Without a word, she turned and fled back to the house.



MARÍA

Matt gazed up. Hundreds of stars lay in a bright smear across a velvety, black sky. It was the Milky Way, which Celia said had spurted from the Virgin's breast when She first fed Baby Jesus. The grass pressed against Matt's back. It wasn't as soft as he'd imagined, but it smelled fresh, and the coolness of the air was good, too. He felt hot and feverish.

The terrifying pain had subsided to a dull ache. Matt was glad to be outside again. The sky felt familiar and safe. The same stars hung over the little house in the poppy fields. Celia never took him outside by day, but sometimes at night she and he would sit in the doorway of the little house. She would tell him stories and point out a falling star. "That's a prayer being answered by God," she explained. "One of the angels is flying down to carry out God's orders."

Matt prayed now for Celia to come and rescue him. She'd be upset about the window, but he could live with that. No matter how loud she yelled, he knew that underneath she still loved him. He watched the sky, but no star fell.

"Look at him. He's just lying there like an animal," said Emilia from not far away. Matt jumped. He'd forgotten about the children.

"He *is* an animal," Steven said after a pause. They were sitting on the first step leading to the house. María was busy picking oranges from the trees and rolling them down the stairs.

"I don't understand," said Emilia.

"I've been stupid. I should have known what he— *it*—was the minute I saw it. No servant would be allowed to keep a child or live away from the others. Benito told me about the situation, only I thought *it* was living somewhere else. In a zoo, maybe. Wherever those things are kept."

"What are you talking about?"

"Matt's a clone," said Steven.

Emilia gasped. "He can't be! He doesn't—I've seen clones. They're horrible! They drool and mess their pants. They make animal noises."

"This one's different. Benito told me. Technicians are supposed to destroy the minds at birth—it's the law. But El Patrón wanted his to grow up like a real boy. He's so rich, he can break any law he wants."

"That's *disgusting*. Clones aren't people," cried Emilia.

"Of course they aren't."

Emilia hugged her knees. "It makes me feel goose bumpy. I actually touched it. I got its blood on me—María, stop rolling oranges at us!"

"Make me," jeered María.

"In about one second I'm going to roll *you* down the stairs."

The little girl stuck out her tongue. She threw a fruit so hard, it shot off the bottom step and landed with a soft plop on the grass. "Want me to peel you one, Matt?" she called.

“Don’t,” said Emilia. The seriousness in her voice made the little girl pause. “Matt’s a clone. You mustn’t go near it.”

“What’s a clone?”

“A bad animal.”

“How bad?” María said with interest.

Before Emilia could answer, the fierce man and the doctor appeared at the top of the stairs.

“You should have called me at once,” the doctor said. “It’s my job to make sure it stays healthy.”

“I didn’t find out until I walked past the living room. There was blood all over the place. I’m afraid I lost my head and ordered Rosa to throw it outside.” The fierce man seemed less dangerous now, but Matt still tried to wriggle away. The movement sent a wave of agony through his foot.

“We’ll have to take it somewhere else. I can’t operate on the lawn.”

“There’s an empty room in the servants’ quarters,” said the fierce man. He shouted for Rosa, who pattered down the steps with a furious look on her face. She carted Matt to a different part of the house, a warren of dim hallways that smelled of mold. Steven, Emilia, and María were ordered away, to take showers and change their clothes.

Matt was deposited onto a hard, bare mattress. The room was long and narrow. At one end was the door and at the other a window covered with iron grillwork.

“I need more light,” the doctor said, tersely. The fierce man brought a lamp. “Hold it down,” the doctor ordered Rosa.

“Please, Master. It’s a filthy clone,” the woman objected.

“Get moving if you know what’s good for you,” the fierce man growled. Rosa threw herself across Matt’s body and grasped his ankles. Her weight made it almost impossible to breathe.

“Stop . . . stop . . .,” the boy wailed. The doctor probed in the deepest cut with a pair of tweezers as Matt struggled and begged and finally broke down entirely when the sliver of glass was extracted. Rosa held on to his ankles so tightly, her fingers burned like fire. When at last the wound was cleaned and stitched, Matt was set free. He rolled himself into a ball and looked fearfully at his tormentors to see if they planned anything else.

“I’ve given it a tetanus shot,” said the doctor, putting away his instruments. “There may be permanent damage to the right foot.”

“Can I send it back to the poppy fields?” inquired the fierce man.

“Too late. The children have seen it.”

The men and Rosa went out. Matt wondered what would happen next. If he prayed very hard, Celia would surely come for him now. She would hug him and carry him off to bed. Then she would light the holy candle in front of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Except that the Virgin was far away in the little house, and Celia might not even know where he was.

Rosa slammed open the door and laid newspapers all over the floor. “The doctor says you’re housebroken, but I’m not taking chances,” she said. “Do it in the bucket if you’ve got the brains.” She placed a bucket next to the bed and picked up the lamp.

“Wait,” Matt said.

Rosa paused. She looked distinctly unfriendly.

“Can you tell Celia where I am?”

The maid smiled maliciously. “Celia isn’t allowed to see you. Doctor’s orders.” She went out and closed the door.

The room was dark except for a faint, yellow light filtering through the bars of the window. Matt

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