

After Valentine's Day the Cold Ameliorates

On the way home to the bleak studio apartment they shared, José and Margarita often stopped to look at Bernie Blanco's ramshackle used car lot at the corner of Hamilton and Ashtree Road. The neighborhood was a line-up of decrepit structures, not so dissimilar to the gang-infested, eclectic construction of multicolored, tumbledown housing in Managua, but crucially without the violence. It was not the kind of place where the young couple had dreamt of beginning a new life. Still, it provided protection against the days and nights of weather extremes that visit Cincinnati. This freezing Wednesday afternoon as they passed Blanco's Used Cars, where--*Se habla español*--both stopped to gaze longingly at a beige Ford Bronco, its hood partially covered with snow. José said to himself, *We are in America now; we must have a car.* Margarita complained, "Hey, when are you gonna get us a car to drive? It is too cold to walk all the time. When we have *niños* what will we do?" José turned to face his wife, "What are you talking about? Are you pregnant?!" She replied, "No, *idiota!* I am cold."

Bernie's name actually had been Bernardo until he changed it upon arriving in the US. It was a business decision. In Cincinnati the banks would not loan to Bernardo, but they would to Bernie. He had arrived in the city with his wife and their young son, Juan, but Rigoberta could not take the cultural shift, so she had returned home. Juan, renamed John, was now an Electrical and Computer Tech Engineering student at Wright State. Bernie regarded the two from behind the smudged windows of his cramped office. Behind his black beard he chuckled to himself: *These two are young but they argue like an old married couple.* Bernie walked over and yanked open his stubborn office door: "Hey, you two, *mis amigos.* Come here." The couple stopped talking and walked up to the *hefe*, the name for

any businessman in their country. Looking at the short, brown-skinned black-haired man and woman, he thought: *They are a couple of real indios.* “Bueno dia! You two speak English?” José replied, “Sí, I mean, yes, of course.” An apprehensive look crept across Margarita’s face. They had no papers or green card, so she suspected everyone of potentially being an *inmigración*. Bernie said, “I saw you looking at that Bronco. You want to buy it? I’ll make you a good price.”

José said, “Yes. It looks like a nice car. How much is it?” As soon as the words left his mouth, he was sorry that he had asked, fearing that the price would surely be too high for them. Flashing his most professional smile, Bernie said, “I like you two. I will make a special price just for you, like I said, five-hundred dollars cash. It’s in great shape, runs very well. Imagine driving all over town in this Bronco. Your friends will be so jealous.” Margarita said to her husband in Spanish, “Why is he talking to us like friends? We don’t know him. And we don’t have any friends here.” Bernie, replied, also in Spanish, “I have seen you two many times before. You look like nice people. I want you to have this car.” José said, “Thank you mister, but that is too much money for us.” The couple turned to walk away. Bernie called after them, “Think about it. I will keep it for you for a week. A lot of customers are looking at that Bronco, so don’t wait too long.” José and his wife walked away; it was a long shot, but they could not keep their heads from spinning with the possibilities. Bernie went back inside to the warm mustiness of his office and sat down in his creaky leather desk chair: That car had been on his lot for more than a year.

Back in their lukewarm apartment, José thought about how good it would be not to have to ride the bicycle that he had found abandoned behind El Valle Verde, a restaurant-market on Vine in Elmwood Place. They, and many others like them, shopped there when they had money.

That night Margarita flung herself awake from a nightmare, striking her husband with an arm, startling him awake. “I’m sorry she said. It was another bad dream.” José asked, “Which one this time?” She shuddered, unable to shake the terror and misery of life in camps outside Ciudad Juárez along the US-Mexican border. José said, “Most people think of hell as a pit filled with fire, but it is really rain, heat and mud in those camps run by mafiosi. The Mexican police provide no protection, they are just as likely to rob you or worse.” Her husband pulled her close to him and hugged her until she returned to sleep.

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the central American region; only Haiti is below it. Neither they nor their friends were able to find jobs which, even had they existed, would have condemned them to lives of grinding poverty. They had to leave. They left the many pretty churches at home that provided little peace or security. There would be no more boating or fishing in the city’s beautiful Lake Managua. These were among the memories of home, of family, of friends that grew brighter as they receded into the physical distance.

Arriving at the border they joined long lines of people waiting to file an application for asylum, but then were told that they would have to wait for who knows how long for a hearing to see if they qualified for entry. They joined with many others from different parts of the world with different shades of dark skin. Those unfortunates had made a desperate trek through the mountainous jungle and low-lying swamp of the Darién Gap, connecting the Pan-American highway between Colombia and Panama. The wild beasts that lurked in the jungle did not all go on four legs or slither along the ground; those on two legs were the worst. Many had been robbed by mafiosi of the little money—even their food and clothing—that was left over after paying the *coyotes* to lead them to what they hoped would be a better future. In the camp thieves took money Margarita’s mother had given them, money she had

scrimped to save over the years, as well as her family photos. She had cried and wondered what use her memories could be to thieves?

Margarita and José decided not to wait for a hearing date. They swam the Rio entering the US near Mexicali, survived crossing the Sonora Desert in Arizona, finally ending their unlikely journey in Cincinnati penniless, with only the cloths on their backs. Locals directed them to the Catholic Charities of Southwestern Ohio Su casa offices on Reading Road, where they received help finding food, clothing, and their apartment.

They missed their families in Managua, but missing family members was an experience that they had experienced even before leaving home. José had already lost his older brother to the gangs. MS-13, Mara Salvatrucha, had forced him to join, then he had been killed in a shootout with a rival gang. An uncle had been “disappeared” by Ortega’s police. Margarita missed her mom and her two younger sisters who cried inconsolably at the prospect of her leaving. Margarita and José had been friends since childhood, a friendship that became a different kind of love. Her family was his family and so on. “Don’t worry. When José and I are settled, we will send you money to come,” she said. At that point, though, her pledge did little to fill the gap that her departure would leave in the web of family affections. Even her marriage ceremony to José had been quick, stripped of the presence of many family members and friends, the joyfulness and ceremony of a normal wedding. Her mother said, “Maybe you will return home to us. I am too old to make the trip all that way north. I pray to god that I will see you again, and the grandchildren that you and José will have.”

In the morning José looked out of the window at the dull gray sky and the dirty snow covering the sidewalk. The cold air seeped through the crevices in the frame. He put on his jacket preparing to go out to work, wondering if he would ever adjust to

the winter cold; he longed for the warmth of Managua. He drank the hot tea and ate the corn tortillas that Margarita had prepared for breakfast. Exiting the apartment, he took the bike from the side of the house and set out to go ride up to Blanco's car lot. He went to the door and knocked on the glass. Bernie opened it and invited José inside. "Pretty cold today, huh?" he said. Dispensing with small talk José said, "I want to ask you for a job. I am a good worker, reliable. I will keep your cars clean and pick up the trash around the lot. I will do anything if what I earn can be put towards buying that Bronco. Margarita is very depressed so far from home. I want to show her that we made the right choice to come north. I also want to show her how much I love her. If I can buy this caro maybe she will be more hopeful." Bernie was sympathetic; he recalled how lonely it had been for him when he left his family and home, then his wife left him and their son in Cincinnati.

He really did not need help, or more precisely, he could not afford to hire help. But Bernie could not turn the young man down, and his work would not have to be paid. The work that he would perform would compensate for the value of the Bronco. He had lost all hope of selling it anyway. "Sure compadre. You can start now by brushing this *maldito* snow off of my fine vehicles." José was elated. Leaning his bike on the side of the office building he said, "I will begin right away." The Bronco was the first to receive his attention.

Bernie looked at his new employee and seemed lost in thought. "José," he said. "You know that in America there is a special day to declare love for a woman. It is called Valentine's Day, after the saint." José replied, "I never heard of it, but it sounds like a nice day. I never heard of Saint Valentine at home, and we are Catholics." Bernie said, "The day is not highly respected here. Most times it is men forgetting about it until something reminds them about it at the last minute, and they rush to buy a card, or candy, or flowers for their wives or lovers. In your situation

the Bronco would mean a lot to your wife, and you will be giving her a much better sign of your love than a fake card or stale flowers. Wait, let me get the keys.” Bernie came out of the office with the keys to the Bronco. He climbed inside, inserted the key and turned it. The motor hesitated and coughed before turning over and putting out a regular chugging sound. “Listen to that! Beautiful, isn’t it?” A smile appeared on José’s face. “I want Margarita to see this,” he said. “Wait,” Bernie said. “Don’t say anything. Surprise her. Valentine’s Day is still a few weeks away.” “Bueno,” José said. “I will wait.”

When José told his wife about his new job, he did not tell her that it was unpaid. Both of them already had jobs bagging groceries and stocking the shelves at a Kroger’s. Margarita asked, “How will you find the time to work both places?” he replied, “Don’t worry; it will be worth it.” Weeks passed quickly. José worked days at Blanco’s and nights at Kroger’s. His wife saw him becoming so tired. Finally on Valentine’s Day, José took his wife to Blanco’s where the Bronco was waiting for them with a big red bow on the front end and the engine running. Mounting in José drove into the traffic on Hamilton Avenue, much to Margarita’s delight. “I can’t believe we have this car, and it is so warm inside.” She turned to her smiling husband and said, “I have a surprise for you, too. Soon we will be a family.”