

## **Sangre del Toro**

Adelida sat on the banks of the muddy Sangre del Toro River with her lanky legs pulled up under her chin. She leaned back against a century-old cottonwood tree and stared straight ahead at the river, gone bone-dry from the drought. As thoughts tumbled in her mind, her eye was caught by a gray catfish flopping around in the mud, gills now useless. The fish was stuck because all of the river water had disappeared. Seemed that river wasn't really a river so much as damp clay since the drought.

In the shade of that gnarled tree, Adelida found fleeting relief from the ninety-eight degree heat. A swim in the river would have been nice. Usually while her mind worked she tossed pebbles in the water, just to watch the ripples. That ol' blood-colored mud wasn't going to make anything much like ripples today. Instead she snapped twigs and tossed rocks and tormented ants. And she thought. There was a lot of hard thinking to be done in her twelve-year-old mind. Her mama had always said she was too smart for her own good. She sometimes wondered if she would have been better off born dumb. Then she wouldn't question things so much and could act as stupid as her brother, Zeke.

With a sigh, she stood up to her full height with dirty-kneed long legs and dark braids down each side of her head. She brushed the dirt and leaves off her backside, careful to be gentle around the bruises. She knew she'd better get back in time to get chores done. It was always better to get them done early rather than too late. Too late was always much too late, and Papa'd make her pay.

Adelida ran toward home but thought better of it in the heat. The small cabin was made from boards left too long out in the weather. They were so beaten they had gone gray, no longer the color of wood. The shack sat on a gentle and low hill, and to the west sagged a dilapidated horse barn and leaning chicken coop. Adelida hated chickens but loved the horses.

She went into the barn and found a bag of chicken feed right where she'd left it, filled her shallow pan, and walked to the coop. The foul birds waddled over to her, knowing it was feeding time. She kicked a fat hen out the way and scattered seed in the center of the coop, careful to leave a clean getaway route in case the birds got testy. When the pan was empty, she went into the smaller enclosure to rob the hens of their eggs, her least favorite chore. Adelida once got so mad she wrung the neck of a Rhode Island Red that had pecked a hole clean down to the knuckle on her right hand. Boy, did she ever pay for killing that bird. Her mother loved chickens and her father hated waste. Adelida took Papa's beating in stride yet savored every morsel of that chicken, fried up and served on the dinner table. She even cracked the bones of that nasty ol' hen and sucked out the marrow.

Adelida was glad that several of the hens were off their nests, making it easier to take their eggs. She shoved her hand under a sleeping bird and was done before the hen knew what had happened. The stolen eggs went into a basket to take inside. Her mother would pick out the best to sell at market.

Returning to the barn, she got her rake and wheelbarrow and walked with a whistle to the horse stalls. Most people hated mucking out stalls but Adelida found a sense of peace cleaning up hay and manure and laying down fresh straw. She put a little extra in the stall for the old strawberry roan. He was old and she felt sorry for him, so gave him extra

cushion. That old horse laid down more often these days, and Adelida wanted him to be comfortable. He'd let her on his back without complaint ever since she was a baby and she liked to thank him for it.

After the stalls were clean and the manger filled with hay, Adelida took the wheelbarrow of horse manure out to the pile. Her mama used it on the garden to make the tomato and squash plants grow. Her papa tried to till it into the soil, but it didn't help much. All the horse poop in the world wouldn't make cotton plants grow if there wasn't water coming from the sky.

Her final chore was to milk the cows, three lazy Holsteins with varying personalities. Adelida had trained them to come up when it was time to milk so she didn't have to chase them around. If she took too much time with the horses, the youngest cow, named Petunia, would get impatient and start to bellow. If it went on for too long, her papa would get tired of the noise, so Adelida made sure that side of beef didn't bellow more than twice.

She grabbed her bucket and sat with a sigh of resignation on the milking stool. She worked mindlessly, pulling away at the teats, lost in her thoughts about how she felt stuck in this life. Like it seemed there should be more, but instead she was born here, without her consent. Trapped like those stupid fish caught in the disappearing river, flailing away, out of her element, dying for a clean clear breath.

She was too young to run away and too old to be without responsibility. Living on this dry patch of dirt, suffering every sunup, and lamenting every sundown were wearing her thin. She'd shake her fists at the sky and wonder why that old thing called God didn't listen. She had long ago given up praying. If there was a god, he sure didn't listen to prayers from out here in the middle of nowhere. If he had, her papa wouldn't beat her when her chores weren't done and the cottonseeds would take and her mama wouldn't serve them tasteless old pinto beans with no ham hocks and no cornbread for what must be the thousandth night. As Adelida pulled away at the cow's swollen udder, lost in thought, she heard her mother's scream echo down the valley.

Adelida startled, almost knocking over the bucket. Petunia kicked out a back hoof but didn't make contact. The cow went back to grinding dry grass in her teeth and Adelida stood up to go find her mother who had always been prone to drama, so Adelida didn't bother to be in much of a hurry.

She found her mother in the field, the wind flailing her hair like that Medusa they'd read about in school. At her mother's feet was a lump. As Adelida got closer, she realized the lump was her father.

While her mother kept screaming, bloodcurdling cries that echoed off the canyon walls, Adelida dropped to her knees and rolled her father over on his back. His glassy eyes stared straight out. She put her ear to his chest and found what she already knew: Lying there bug-eyed in the dirt, her father was dead.

Folks whispered about how he couldn't bear it that those cotton plants didn't take or that he might lose the farm. Officially, they said it was a heart attack, and two days later some men came and helped dig a hole out by the pecan tree. Father did like him a nice pecan pie, so it seemed only right he'd be down there now with the roots, helping that tree grow. Adelida's mother slipped into shock. She drifted around, eyes open but not really seeing. She'd say, "I don't know how to run things; why'd he have to go?" and then she'd shake her head so hard, Adelida thought Mama's teeth would rattle out of her skull.

She wrote a letter to her brother, Zeke. He'd left a few months back to join the Army. Zeke was sort of slow, but the Army took him anyway. He'd sent a picture with his hair

all shaved off, ears sticking out. He looked real grown up in that green uniform. No one would ever know from that picture that Zeke was anything but a soldier.

Adelida and her mother both wandered around the farm, unsure what to do. Adelida's school didn't start for another month, and without her father to run things, she felt lost. She kept up with her chores for a while, but what did it matter anymore? Her mother took to bed, and the farm went to weed. Adelida needed help but the only adult in her world had turned to something no better than a baby, sucking at a rye bottle, whimpering and moaning, and not speaking real words anymore. Adelida tried desperately to get her to talk or at least get out of bed, but nothing worked.

"I'm just a kid," she yelled at her mute mother. "I can't do this. You have to be the grown-up."

Her mother lay unseeing, unhearing, on the bed.

Adelida gave up trying. She spent most days by the river, listening to the wind rustle the prairie grass that grew where the water used to flow.

Waking from a long nap under the cottonwood tree, Adelida felt her stomach growl. There wasn't anything to eat, but she headed home anyway. Maybe there was little cornmeal left and she could fix a corncake. She walked slowly, taking her time getting back. Nearing the door, she felt again the burning anger she had for her mother, thinking her both weak and irresponsible. Adelida also hurt that her father was gone. He was a mean son-of-a-cuss, but he was her papa and he took care of things. If this kept up, pretty soon they'd be half starved, and Adelida didn't know what would happen then.

As she pushed open the ragged wooden door, Adelida felt something was not quite right. The door swung into the dark cabin, and a shaft of light cut the darkness landing on the bed. It was empty.

"Mama?" Adelida questioned the dark corners. "Mama, where are you?" she asked plaintively. There was no reply and Adelida got a sick feeling in her stomach. She searched every inch of the cabin and found nothing but silence.

Adelida instinctively went to the horse barn. The saddle for the baldy mare was gone, and so was the horse. It was the last animal that hadn't jumped the run down fence in the north pasture searching for food. Adelida started to panic but told herself that maybe her mother had gone into town. Maybe she'd come back with bags of wheat flour and a beefsteak, and tonight they'd eat like kings. She kept repeating this story to herself because the alternative was too much to bear. Her own mother wouldn't leave, right? Mothers didn't do that.

Adelida took to counting sunrises and sunsets. She kept a burnt stick and made marks on the tabletop. After the sun had gone both up and down twelve times, Adelida gave up. Her mother wasn't coming back. She was gone and Adelida was trapped. Stuck. She had thought she was stuck in this stupid place before, but she realized she didn't know from stuck back then. Now she knew.

Sitting at the table, empty in her gut, Adelida remembered those dying fish, flopping in the red mud. Dumb ol' fishes, how could they get caught like that? Didn't they go where the water went? The more she thought about those suffocating catfish struggling for air, the more she understood how they got stuck. They didn't know the water was going away. Sometimes things happened that you didn't expect. Sometimes the sky stopped giving rain, and sometimes the land stopped giving life. Now she knew how those catfish felt.

Adelida went outside and found the place where her father had been laid out by the pecan tree. She didn't have much of a relationship with her father when he was alive, but at

least he never left her. She wasn't truly alone as long as he was still there. Adelida dropped to her knees by the grave, then lay down and rested her head on the ground and sighed, nostrils breathing in red dirt, tears turning to red clay.