

María Juana's

GIFT

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María Juana's
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A Novel

by

T. Lloyd Winetsky

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PART I



*Anne S., Jake Dylan and
Jake Dylan Friend, 15 Months
("Constance," the Gower Street Theater, 1951)*

1

The old woman was less than five feet tall and not even a nurse's aide, but it was obvious to Jake that she knew what she was doing. One moment he would see Maria carrying out heavy bags of trash, and minutes later he observed her holding the baby with an authority and tenderness that gave him some hope.

He watched her now, but the pink blanket in her arms didn't move—no wiggling, no crying, and Maria had stopped acting as if the baby were responsive. Jake and his student who lived with them, Ben, had just visited Tina for a few minutes in her room at the end of the ward. Her reticence led Ben to excuse himself to wait in the truck.

Jake knocked lightly on the nursery window so he could talk to Maria, who was returning the baby to the incubator for more oxygen. She met him at the glass door, leaning on it hard because of pressure from the air conditioning; Jake pulled it open for her.

Maria's pale-brown face was drawn and grave. “¿Señor Fren, el doctor?”

Frowning, Jake told her he hadn't found him.

“Señor, la niña, she is worse. She breathes faster,” she said in Spanish, pointing up at the speaker near the ceiling. “I heard there was an emergency; the doctor came.”

“What? ¿Cuándo, señora?”

“Maybe a half-hour.”

“I'll be damned,” Jake mumbled to himself, already hurrying away from the nursery into the hall toward the small emergency area. He passed the closed administrator's office and saw the door to the doctors' lounge was ajar. Jake stopped, opened it and called, “Hello?” A dark suit coat and blue tie were draped over the top of a leather recliner; he assumed the clothes were Serna's. Jake left and turned a corner, but he had to stop to keep from colliding with a custodian who was dry-mopping.

"See the doctor go by here?" Jake asked.

The heavy man, a bit startled by this unexpected redhead in a beard, baseball cap and Bermudas, finally said, "*El doctor*, he go."

"*Gracias, señor.*" Jake hopped over the wide broom and ran to the bench by the back door where many times in the last day he waited futilely, trying to catch the doctor when he left.

Jake went right out into a blast of dry, hundred-degree air to the nearly empty staff parking area. He ran around the corner of the hospital and saw the vintage white Corvette convertible easily take the steep hill, a passenger in the seat next to Doctor Serna.

"Damn it!" Jake shouted, not far from the grey stone face of Mary holding baby Jesus. He ran for the visitors' parking lot and could already see Ben, waiting in the front seat of Jake's old truck.

Doctor Serna and his cousin, the mayor, had no idea someone was pursuing them; the doctor's high-powered engine easily conquered another incline while several blocks back Jake's forty-horse motor strained, balking like a mule.

The Corvette disappeared from Jake's sight; he yanked his gearshift all the way down to second. "Crap, Loretta," he grumbled to the dual-cab Volkswagen he had been refurbishing for years. *Swear to God, you're sold if the damn doctor gets away.*

"¿*Maestro?*?" the teen said, a quiver in his voice.

"It's okay, Ben, I just need to talk to the jerk." *And take him back.*

The pickup slugged onward past some carbon-copy three-bedroom ramblers up to the summit where the afternoon sun struck Jake in the eyes. He reached for the visor, forgetting he had yet to repair it, and instead pulled down the brim of his Chicago Cubs cap. Ben blocked the glare with his arm.

Three blocks ahead at a stop sign, he could see the doctor's Panama hat and the mayor's bald head. To Jake, they looked like tourists at the border, basking in the sun as if it were provided by the gods just for them. He hoped they would stop at the doctor's office, but Serna drove by well above the speed limit.

He's going home, Jake thought, but the Corvette didn't turn into La Cholla Gardens, where the doctor lived; he was heading to town. "Hold on!" he called out to Ben.

His student's dark skin blanched a shade as Jake ran the stop sign. Ben ducked, slouching his gaunt frame below the windowsill. On the down slope, Jake accelerated almost to fifty, the trees and houses blurring by.

"*Maestro*, you leave me here?"

"What?" *He saw someone back there.* "Okay—this next hill, when I have to slow down."

"*Está bien.*"

The truck hit the incline and started to labor; Jake released the gas pedal, stopping their forward motion. He yanked the hand brake to keep from rolling back, and saw the passenger door was already open. Ben jumped out, waved, and ran down an alley; Jake struggled on up the hill in first gear.

At the next summit, he saw his prey had lengthened the lead to about a half-mile, but Jake was less than a hundred yards behind by the time he sped down to level ground near the fruit warehouse at the outskirts of La Cholla. Doctor Serna parked behind a ceremonial black and white '51 Ford squad car at the head of a line of disparate vehicles.

The friggin' parade. Two Cadillacs idled behind the Corvette, then a fire engine, six antique autos full of war veterans, a farm tractor pulling a hay wagon swarming with Brownie scouts, and four teams of Little Leaguers in station wagons. Eight horses followed, mounted by glittering Mexican *charros* in wide *sombreros*, then came a hobo clown with a shovel cart, and a tiny red Nash Metropolitan stuffed with three more clowns—one red, one white, and one blue. Every child held a patriotic helium balloon, and some of the adults had dressed up as sons or daughters of the Revolution.

The high school band was near the end, thirty strong, in stifling, clashing black-and-orange uniforms. The teens stood in the shade by a semi's trailer, sullenly unpacking instruments in front of a green tractor that pulled the town float. Sitting up there on star-spangled stairs beneath a white umbrella, the stout 1976 Miss La Cholla primped her puffy black coiffure, gazing into a pocket mirror. The town's tall yellow street sweeper, draped in flag bunting, was the last in line. Its driver, impatient for the parade to begin, was making the square vehicle spin slowly in place like a robot.

There were no curbs this far from downtown, so Jake just pulled off the road by some other cars near the fruit warehouse, not far from Miss La Cholla. He got out of his truck, then ran in starts and stops toward the front of the queue, not noticing a police car slowly following him a half-block behind.

As Jake dodged around participants and gawkers, he recalled that the parade would cross the border and loop through old La Cholla. *No wonder nobody's marching; they don't want to get stuck in Mexico.*

He passed the clowns, who were opening boxes of goodies to throw to the kids—baseball card packs on this side, then athletic socks and hard candy below the border. Jake saw some citizens fooling around with bunting and a sign for the doctor's car: GRAND MARSHALL—MAYOR "RICO" RANGEL. *He can just find another damn driver.*



Sixteen months before the parade in La Cholla, Jake gazed out at a sign in San Diego—OLD TOWN BAKERY AND PANADERIA. He was thinking that some warm *pan dulce* with margarine melted on top sounded good. Fog and the evening rush hour had extended their trip to nearly three hours.

Armando drove two more blocks, circled another, and turned the school district sedan into a parking lot. Except for snoring from the two veteran female teachers in the back, the last fifteen minutes of the drive were quiet; Jake and Armando had run out of things to talk about.

The uneven black letters on the bright sign outside the hotel read, **WELCOME mig/Biling Ed/eSl**, adding to Jake's certainty that his third dreary state conference wouldn't affect anything important in his life.

"Why the frown, Skip?" *Skip* was a recent addition to Armando's exuberant vocabulary, but Jake didn't mind. The fledgling teacher was doing well in their alternative classroom for secondary migrant students, although the previous summer Jake had to convince the principal to hire Armando.

"Not frowning," Jake said, intentionally loud enough to wake the women. Armando parked; they all got out and entered the lobby with light baggage. The hotel had already begun to decorate for the Bicentennial—nothing elaborate yet, just a tall poster of a smirking George Washington and some strings of tiny U.S. flags around the door of the small gift shop.

While Armando and the two rumpled women checked out the tourist junk, Jake handled the purchase order. He made sure their room was far away from "the two ol' bags," as Armando referred to them. The four teachers then registered at the conference table, all but Jake obediently pinning on a two by four-inch rainbow-bordered name badge.

At the third floor, the women glared at Armando before leaving the elevator; the young teacher shrugged and punched the "7" button. Predictably, he and Jake looked up at the indicator as they passed the fourth floor.

Armando Tapia had chestnut-colored skin and dense, raven hair that matched his brows, moustache and long sideburns. Unlike his mentor six feet away, Armando's regular smile gave the impression he was content even when he wasn't. He and Jake had one physical similarity, they were both two inches or so shy of six feet tall.

Jake, a "fat kid" through puberty, developed in his early twenties a preference for walking and biking whenever he could, but the benefits of his exercise sometimes lost out to a daily "beer or two." Now almost twenty-six, his waist had a two-inch fold of adipose; he outweighed lean Armando by about thirty pounds.

A shade darker than a classic redhead, Jake was fair but didn't look

blushed, and his constellations of freckles faded over the years. His slowly receding hair and a sporadically trimmed full beard had darkened from rufous red almost to brown. Jake's most obvious feature, thick auburn eyebrows, furrowed, arched or flattened with any serious thought that crossed his mind.

Both men waited for the elevator in garb typical of what they wore in class—Armando in pressed half-belled blue jeans, black loafers and a brightly printed shirt; Jake in coarse suede shoes, dark-brown jeans and a short-sleeve light-blue dress shirt, never a tie.

The seventh-floor bell “dinged” and Jake turned to Armando, who carried one worn cardboard valise; his black guitar case stood next to him on the elevator floor.

“Far enough away, are we?” Jake asked, grinning.

“Yeah, Skip, thanks. Those two would cramp my style for sure. We’re not eating dinner with them, right?”

“We’re on our own,” he said as the door opened.

Armando twitched his rakish moustache and broadened his smile as he lifted the luggage. “The room’s still mine for tomorrow night; you’re at your brother’s, right?”

Jake hefted his grey canvas bag as they exited, searching for numbers. “My cousin’s.” He turned a corner. “You’re *that* sure you’re going to score?”

“Can’t miss *con mi guitarra*.” He raised the black case and “yipped” as if he were singing a *ranchera*.

“Geez, don’t get us kicked out the first night.”

Armando put a forefinger over his lips. “Got it, Skip, play it cool.”

They walked ahead, reading door numbers. “Where did you come up with *Skip*?” Jake asked.

“That’s what we called our coach. You’re the Skip of our little team, man.”

“Great.” They turned down a hall. “So, you’ll be trying to date a teacher?”

“You nuts? If they’re not old like those two,” he pointed down, “they act like ’em. I’ll be checking out teacher’s aides. What about you?”

“The women here are too young, too married, or still into Elvis.”

“You gotta be lookin’ for something.”

“Yeah, I found it.” Jake pointed at room 725; Armando already had his key out; he opened the door and rushed in. All the lights were on by the time Jake plopped his bag on the first of two queen beds.

Armando drew back the white curtains. “This is perfect, Skip; check out the view.”

Jake looked out at downtown San Diego. The fog had lifted to overcast; a

flashing airliner seemed to be making a suicidal descent right between glimmering office buildings.

"Damn, how can they do that?" Armando said, not expecting an answer. The room had the typical small coffee pot, plastic ice bucket, and sterile wrapped glasses. On the wall above the dresser, a metal-framed print portrayed a generic sailboat on the ocean that was actually several miles from the hotel.

Jake smiled. "First time this high, Mister Tapia?"

"Yup, this beats those dumps on Highway 99. Let's see how the TV works." Armando lifted a boxy remote control attached to the nightstand.

The news came on, the announcer blaring, "... Revere's kitchen table in 1775—your Bicentennial Minute for Wednesday, February twenty-sixth, nineteen seventy-five."

"I can't wait to learn the name of Paul Revere's horse," Jake said.

"Yeah, let's eat. I'm starved." Armando muted the sound and checked some other channels.

"Do you want to go out or eat downstairs?"

"Downstairs—easy pickin's." He turned off the TV.

Jake looked at him askance but didn't care enough to ask what he meant. After they washed up, Armando put on a white Filipino shirt; Jake didn't change. About ten minutes later, they entered a half-occupied restaurant decorated with fishing nets, blue glass floats, swords and seahorses. They stood by a Neptune dummy that held a sign in the shape of a treasure chest: PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED.

"Where's your name tag, Skip?"

"In the room."

"It's okay, I've got mine." He patted his badge.

"So?" Jake replied just before a young peroxide-blonde hostess in a jaunty sailor cap walked up to them.

"Two?" she asked Armando.

"We're meeting some friends. If we don't find them," his smile widened, "maybe you could find us a table."

She literally flapped her artificial black lashes. "Anything I can do to help, sir."

They walked into the seating area; Armando half-winked back to her.

"Well, I think you already scored," Jake murmured.

"Not really my type, but who knows?"

"I thought you didn't want to eat with those two."

"You're kidding, right?" Armando scanned the diners as they walked.

“We’ll eat alone before we do that.”

“Then who are you looking for?”

“We just passed a good possibility. Back, Skip.”

Jake turned and saw two women, not ten feet away, slightly slouched and reading their menus at a table set for five. They were both at least Armando’s age; one had medium-length curly brunet hair and strikingly dark oval eyes. To Jake, her attractiveness was compromised by ponderous silver earrings, a matching gaudy necklace, and the rank cigarette smoke she kept waving from her bronze face.

Armando started toward them; Jake lagged behind, thinking the second woman was unremarkable. She wasn’t homely or even plain, but her pale, serious, rounded features had no help at all from Revlon, and unlike her friend, she wore no jewelry. He thought she had average looks and was twenty-five, at most. *God, but look at that hair.* It was long and honey-blond, natural, he decided, cascading by her slender neck and over her shoulders like clear water, even in the dimmed light.

She could pass for Amish—great. Following Armando up to their table, Jake glanced at the rainbow badge on the blonde’s buttoned-up white cardigan: ~~CHRISTINA~~ LINN, VISALIA, BILING ED. CERT., the first five letters struck through with black marker.

“Man, you guys are from Visalia? I’m from Fresno!” Armando blurted, slapping his conference badge. Christina Linn’s face was blank, but Jake noticed her eyes. They looked soft to him, and root beer brown; he liked the contrast with her resplendent hair. Jake couldn’t tell if she was bashful or angry, but he thought she did deserve to be pissed off by the interruption.

“Fresno, no kidding?” the other woman said, as if it really were a coincidence. She smiled fetchingly; her breasts distended the badge on her white blouse: ORALIA MEDINA—VISALIA—TEACHING ASSISTANT. Oralia doused her smoke and presented long fingers and crimson nails to Armando for a delicate handshake. “I’m Orie; this is Tina. You’re a teacher?” she added, clearly impressed by his status.

“*Armando Tapia, a sus órdenes.*” He nodded to them, then away. “This is Jake; we team-teach in Lemon Branch. Would you ladies care for some dinner company?”

Orie grinned toward Tina, who raised her fair brows ambivalently. Jake stood there looking sheepish and wishing they had gone out for beers and Mexican food.

“Sit down; we’re about to order,” Orie said, snickering. “Tell us where Lemon Branch is.” Armando sat on her other side, leaving Jake the chair between the two women.

"Lemon Branch, Orange County," Armando beamed, "just a hop from the Magic Kingdom." He bragged a minute about their program and then asked, "So you guys teach ESL?" Tina looked to Orie as the hostess arrived with more menus, giving Armando a surly glance.

"And some other things," Orie answered, still smiling.

The next hour was small talk over large margaritas. The conversation covered the dinner fare, Disneyland, the San Joaquin Valley and Tijuana, mostly two-way banter between Orie and *Mando*, who had confessed the nickname. As they ate, Tina mostly listened, Jake commented briefly and chuckled; Orie and Armando got louder by the time everyone had dessert. Jake was impressed that Tina understood when they switched to Spanish a few times. All but Tina started on a second margarita while Armando finished telling an energetic joke about seven retarded dwarves, all named Dopey, who couldn't figure out what to do with a willing Snow White.

Tina and Jake sat straight-faced.

Orie forced a smile. "Sorry, baby, but that's more cruel than funny."

Armando turned from her to Jake, who looked back at him with a laugh and said, "Don't look at me, *maestro*, she's right."

Armando slurred a little. "Yeah, guess so."

"Look, Mando," Orie said, "I didn't tell you we work with disabled kids—Bilingual Special Ed."

"Hey, I'm all for *that*," Armando said eagerly, "except when they dump kids in there just because they don't know English. Right, Skip?"

"Of course." Jake made a half-smile.

Orie looked at Tina, and then spoke for them again, this time proudly. "Tina doesn't let that happen in our class. The kids need to have some learning problem besides English."

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying." Armando was pleased he had everyone in agreement. "Hey, my stupid joke got us talkin' school—two whole days for that. Let's order a drink; get into music or movies or something." He had no takers for another round but still looked for the waitress.

"Okay," Orie said, "let's see, I just saw a John Wayne movie, *Micky-D*, something like that. Wasn't very good, cops and robbers, but I do love his cowboy movies."

Armando laughed at Jake. "Another vote for the Duke."

Jake shook his head. "You heard the lady, he's not even versatile enough to play a cop."

"Ladies," Armando said, pointing his thumb, "right here's the only guy in the U.S.A. who doesn't like John Wayne movies."

“You don’t like his politics, Jake?” Orie asked.

“No, I don’t care about his opinions.”

Armando smirked. “Now you gotta explain, man.”

Her pretty eyes wide open, Orie waited for the explanation while Tina slanted her brow, looking puzzled.

“Okay, short and sweet. My dad was an actor—after work, weekends; I grew up around legit actors who loved the stage. You’d think people in L.A. would get used to movie stars, but they treat them like gods. To me, they’re nothing unless they can act and don’t sell out—Gregory Peck, Katharine Hepburn, Brando; damn few others. John Wayne just plays himself; he’s a star, not an actor.” Embarrassed that he got so carried away, Jake was flushed.

Tina cleared her throat, creasing her forehead. “Uh, sorry, I don’t think I’ve heard of him.”

They all stared at her for a few seconds; Jake’s jaw felt unhinged.

“John Wayne?” Armando said, starting to snigger. “You *are* kidding, right, Tina?”

“No,” she answered quietly.

Orie kept herself from laughing. “Tina, you’ve been here six months now; you must’ve heard of him back in college, or after that.”

“No, I went from Kentucky right back to Africa.”

Trying not to stare rudely, Jake said, “Africa?” *And no John Wayne?*

“Yes.” Tina looked at him with a shrug and a very slight grin, transforming her face for a moment.

Jake saw her brief and comely smile. *What was her family doing over there? Diplomats? Doctors? How does she know Spanish?*

Armando, still chortling, was telling Tina how John Wayne was number one at the box office.

Orie jumped in. “Tina, get this, he’s been married,” she showed three fingers, “*tres veces, a tres hispanas.*”

Tina returned a diffident half-smile, again enchanting Jake, who watched her furtively while they filled Tina in on John Wayne’s movies and his real name.

“Enough with the Duke,” Armando finally said to Tina, still amused by her cultural naiveté. “I want to ask you about Jake’s favorite singer, and you gotta tell us the truth.”

“All right,” she said, looking down self-consciously.

“It’s Elvis Presley.” Armando’s tone was gleeful. “You can’t tell me you never heard of *him*. ”

She barely closed her eyes, like a long blink, showing a bit of pique. “Yes,

I know about Elvis.” Tina looked at Jake apologetically. “I don’t like his music very much.”

“Bingo!” Armando shouted, then laughed. “Tina, before he starts telling you how much Elvis sucks, have you ever heard of—?”

“That’s enough, *Mando*,” Orie broke in, eyes daggered. Her interruption barely precluded one from Jake, who looked at Orie appreciatively.

Armando put both arms up helplessly, like in a movie stick-up. “Okay, okay, sorry. Relax, everybody; the night is young.”

Orie yawned. “Not for me it isn’t. We drove half of California and shopped all of *Tijuana*—afraid I’ve had it.”

Armando stood, his mind working on a way to finish his move on Orie. “Should I order coffee?” He searched for the waitress again.

Orie smiled, shaking her head. “Not before bed, baby.”

Either *bed* or *baby* seemed to put Armando in a frenzy; he sat again, proposing to play her some music.

Jake smiled at Tina, who attempted to ignore Armando’s nearby pleading. Before Orie could end the conversation with Armando, Jake tried to summon his nerve. *What the hell, give it a shot; ask her.*



Fifteen minutes later, Jake and Armando sat at the small table in their room and looked out, this time at a propjet flying even more precariously past the modest skyscrapers of San Diego. Jake had picked up two beers downstairs; they sipped from the cans, watching the view.

“Look at that crap,” Armando said. “I’m never goin’ up there.”

Jake scoffed. “You’ll fly before you’re twenty-five.”

“Feeling pretty smart, aren’t you, Skip?” His question was rhetorical. “Man, I can’t believe it; you score for tomorrow night, and I strike out.”

“Yeah,” Jake replied, needling him, “I think I could’ve had a date with either one of them.”

“You’re getting carried away now, man.” Armando shook his head. “I never would’ve guessed Orie’s three years older than me.”

“Like she wasn’t surprised by *your* age?”

“I shoulda’ faked it. It was goin’ good until then.”

Jake couldn’t hold back a snicker. “Yeah, maybe so.”

“It isn’t funny. I heard that line you used on Tina: *¿Le gusta los mariscos?* That’s horrible, and way too formal. She probably hates seafood, but she bought it anyway. She’s into you, man.”

Jake tried not to smile at that reassuring news. “And how do you know that?”

“Shit, I know. So, you take the room tomorrow night.”

“And scare her off? No, I like her.”

“Jesus, aren’t you the guy who was going to the border to check out *las putas*?”

Jake’s light complexion reddened a shade. “We were just going down there for, uh—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Armando interrupted. “Won’t your date mess up the deal with your cousin?”

“I’ll call, and see him on Friday night. The room is yours.”

“Works for me.” Armando stood up. “I’m gonna brush my teeth, get the ol’ *guitarra*, and head downstairs for the social.”

Jake grinned. “Back on the trail?”

Armando started across the room. “Yup. You coming?”

“Nah, I’m finished for one night.”

“Tina’s cool, Skip; and I know you dig that hippie hair, but you just met her.” Armando laughed, stopping near the bathroom. “You sound like an ol’ married man.”

“Yeah, sure. Just go have fun, *Mando*,” Jake chided.

“I will; bank on it,” he called back from the sink.

Regardless of the joking around, Jake thought about what Armando said, admitting to himself that he didn’t know Tina at all. *Acting like a smitten adolescent*. He looked out the window at the lights, finishing his beer. *Then again, she seems like one of a kind.*