

DEBRA
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THE
BRIDE OF BISHOP

A CHAVEZ RAVINE SHORT STORY



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The Bride of Bishop

Juana went back to hanging wet pillowcases on the clothesline, black hair fluttering in the breeze, ignoring her new husband. She did that often: every time Tito suggested leaving Chavez Ravine. He just wanted to take his wife to the beach. Or to hear some jazz. Maybe even lunch at Clifton's Cafeteria. Money wasn't the problem. He had a good paying job at Southern Pacific Railroad. The problem was Juana. She would not step foot out of Chavez Ravine.

Tito came to the place by accident. Or a miracle. He was born and raised in Bisbee, Arizona. When he couldn't bring himself to work another day in the copper mine alongside his father and brothers, he fled to California. He started his new life digging ditches in Los Angeles. In a year he found a better job at a brickyard where he met Joe, a rough around the edges type with a mustache and big heart.

On a Friday as summer turned to fall, Joe invited him to Chavez Ravine for the weekend.

It wasn't an easy journey, Tito soon discovered. They took the Number 10 streetcar, walked Bishop Road under a freeway and then climbed a dirt path until they reached the neighborhood of La Loma.

In the golden light just before sunset, Tito took in the sprawling city of Los Angeles below, then looked around, entranced. The place had a rambling feeling, as if the cottages had been tossed out and landed here and there with some artistic effect. Children scampered across the open hills. Radios blared music in Spanish. Some of the houses were ramshackle, the roads shot with weeds, and the sidewalks made of wood.

The three neighborhoods of Chavez Ravine nestled into Elysian Park like raw, unpolished gems. A tight-knit Mexican community. Tito fit right in. He immediately decided to call it home, renting a little room in a house. His real name was Hector but soon became Tito. Everyone in Chavez Ravine seemed to have a nickname. Chuy. Nando. Ripper. Sopas. Weechie. With his slim build and curly dark hair, he was popular with the girls. He heard them whisper he looked like a movie star.

Months later, Tito wandered around the ravine that he'd not yet explored. It was December, almost time for *Virgin de Guadalupe* Day, and altars were

popping up everywhere. Tito had never seen so many outside a church. It seemed as if everybody was trying to outdo each other paying their respects to *La Virgen*.

That's when he first saw Juana. Taller than most of the girls he'd seen, she wore a light pink dress and a brown sweater. She was fixing up an altar just outside the picket fence of a white clapboard house, arranging bright paper flowers at the base of the brown-skinned statue. A breeze lifted her skirt. Tito smiled. Betty Grable legs. He said hello and introduced himself.

"I don't talk to strangers," she replied. Then she turned and walked away with a toss of her shiny black hair.

Joe nodded when Tito described the girl. "That's Juana Cervantes. I don't know the girls from Bishop, but I've heard something bad happened to her mother, so she never leaves Chavez Ravine."

When Tito pressed him for more information, Joe stubbed out his cigarette and said, "Ask Bertita. The old lady knows everyone."

"Where can I find her?"

"I don't know where she lives, but she goes to Genaro's every day in the afternoon. She's tall and skinny and wears a cap."

On Saturday, his day off, Tito walked all the way to Genaro's store. Bertita was hard to miss. Her hair was stuffed in a colorful scarf, topped with a brimmed cap. She sat on a bench outside smoking a cigar. Bertita greeted him as if she'd known him all his life.

"Of course, I know Juana," said Bertita. "*Es solita*. Such a sad, sad story. An only child. Her parents went to Boyle Heights for a party when she was little, but they never made it. And the horrible thing is Juana's grandmother begged them not to go, said she had a terrible dream that something awful would happen. And it did. Juana's mother died right there on Bishop Road. They didn't even get as far as Broadway. *Que lastima*. And then Juana's father died not long after that. Heart attack. Or some sort of disease, I can't remember now. Juana was raised by her grandparents but they're dead now, too. *Poracita*. You like her, huh?"

Tito nodded because he didn't know what to say.

Bertita looked him up and down. "Her heart may already be taken," she said.

With this warning fresh in mind, he bought flowers for Juana's altar and hung around, hoping to see her. The next day he brought the largest candle he could find and lit it at dusk. But there was still no sign of the pretty girl. She finally appeared on the third day just as Tito was propping up a crucifix he bought at a stall outside *La Placita* Church downtown. This time he had an

audience: three small boys on *carritos*. Tito admired the homemade cars with sticks for brakes.

“I wish I could have had one of those when I was a kid,” he told them. Their eyes flashed with pride as they zoomed around, showing off. Their hoots and hollers brought Juana out onto the porch.

“What are you doing?” she called, dark eyes narrowed. Her heels clicked down the steps, the gate flew open, and she pushed past him to inspect her handiwork with a show of suspicion.

“This altar is the prettiest of all the altars in Chavez Ravine, so I’ve chosen this one to say a prayer to La Virgen,” he explained. He’d practiced what to say so it came out smoothly, just as he intended.

She pointed at the flowers, the candle, and the crucifix. “Did you leave these?”

“I did, *señorita*. They are gifts to La Virgen.”

“Did you pray?” she asked, hands on her hips.

“I was about to,” Tito lied. There was no pillow or bench so he kneeled in the dirt, bent his head, and murmured a Holy Mary because he couldn’t remember the words to the special prayer to La Virgen.

When he stood up, she smiled. Her teeth were straight and white. And just like that, she was transformed from a pretty but serious girl to a beautiful, entrancing woman. He suddenly felt light-headed. He wondered if he was bewitched. He’d heard there was a *curandera* around who dabbled in witchcraft.

The next day he spotted Juana talking to a tall, good-looking guy outside a store. Tito’s mouth went dry. She seemed easy in his company. Tito hoped it was not too late to win her over. He began bringing her gifts from Olvera Street and Chinatown. On weekends, he painted the outside of her house and did odd jobs around the place to show he was hard-working and handy. He got a better paying job at Southern Pacific Railroad. He had few expenses and saved money quickly.

Tito presented Juana with a ring. Never had he spent so much money in his life, but he’d hardly flinched when he handed over the cash to the jeweler.

“It’s beautiful!” Juana said and slipped it on. Then she held out her hand and admired it from every angle. The small round diamond in its platinum setting caught the soft morning sun on the porch.

Tito and Juana married at *El Santo Nino* Church in Palo Verde. They moved into the house her grandfather built, one of the nicest in the ravine, high on the slope of Bishop Canyon.

Tito liked Palo Verde best because it was lively. La Loma came in second because it had a store that sold American foods and not just tortillas, rice, and

beans. But Juana was a Bishop girl and would never move, and, besides, the house was solid and paid for. Tito had no reason to complain. He knew he was lucky to have married a woman with property.

On Fridays, Tito deposited nearly his entire paycheck into their bank account. In the evening, home, he'd pull Juana onto his lap and show her the little passbook with all its recordings while she ran a hand through his curly hair.

Without a mortgage, the money grew fast. He wanted to take Juana to buy new clothes at the shops downtown, but Juana just laughed and shook her head. "I like to make my own clothes," she said.

Juana had a sewing machine with a foot pedal that she kept on the covered back porch. Their neighbor Pancha Lopez worked in the garment district and every Saturday brought Juana leftover material. From these Juana made dresses, skirts, and blouses. She was one of the best dressed women in all of Chavez Ravine. So was Pancha. Juana made her clothes, too.

"How about some new shoes?" Tito asked hopefully.

Juana stuck out a foot, showing off new shoes made of a soft brown leather. "I don't need any. Pancha's sister works at a shoe shop, and she gets me what I like cheap, at a discount." Juana ruffled his hair and kissed the top of his head like he was a silly child and went into the kitchen to make dinner.

On a Saturday evening, Tito paced around the house, restless, desperate to go into town where the lights were bright, and the music streamed out of crowded, smoke-filled nightclubs. He wanted to dance with his wife. Show her off. But Juana just shook her head and laughed. "*Ai*, Tito. Why go all the way down there when we can go dancing *here*?"

Then she fixed her hair and put on her nicest dress, and they walked to La Loma in the warm spring air. Tito could hear music and laughter as they approached a row of houses. The furniture had been moved to the backyards and people gathered, smoking and drinking. Women served *tamales* and *menudo* while couples danced on the powder-sprinkled plank floors. A four-man band played *boleros*, *cumbias*, and popular tunes.

Juana's eyes shone like black diamonds as Tito whirled her around. She was the most beautiful woman there and all the guys wanted a turn to dance with her, but this Tito would not allow, and she was flattered that her handsome new husband was jealous.

Later, in bed, Tito admitted that it was as fun as a night out at the Avadon Bar, but Juana scoffed at this. "The dancing here is best," she said. At this, Tito sighed.

He knew some people stayed up in the neighborhoods for one or two months at a time. But eventually, they'd put on their best clothes and wander down into Los Angeles for business or fun. At first, Tito just shrugged when Juana refused to do this one simple thing. But now it bothered him. They'd been together for a year, and he'd never seen her leave Chavez Ravine. Not once.

On a Saturday afternoon, he decided to confront her. "Come on, babe," he pleaded. "Let's go!" She shook her head and her pretty pout straightened to a hard, flat line. He'd come to know that look.

"I don't want to!" Then she stomped off to hang wet clothes on a cord stretching between two poles in the backyard. Several goats munched grass. They'd wandered over from the Lopez family's house.

Tito paced the length of the back porch. "Why not? We can't stay stuck here forever!"

"I don't like it down there," Juana said, setting down the empty laundry basket and kicking it into a corner.

Tito followed her into the kitchen. The floor was freshly scrubbed, and the dishes put away. Beans sat in a pot of water on the stove for an overnight soak. "Why not?" Tito asked. "You're young. You can't stay cooped up here the rest of your life. Is it because of what happened to your mother?"

"Don't you talk about my mother," Juana shouted. Then she burst into tears, fled to the bedroom, and slammed the door behind her. And there she stayed until Tito promised to stop pestering her, which he finally did hours later. Only then was he allowed to crawl into bed. But that was all she'd let him do. Juana was not quick to forgive.

Tito wasn't ready to give up. On her birthday, he tried to tempt her with a weekend on Catalina Island. But she wanted to celebrate at home. Juana loved Duke Ellington and had all his records, so Tito bought tickets to his show, but on that morning, Juana woke up and said she felt sick and couldn't go.

When Tito announced he expected her to go with him to the Christmas party at his boss's house in Lincoln Heights, Juana sighed and said, "I'm sorry, *mi corazon*, but I'm too nervous around strangers." A downright lie, Tito knew. He'd seen her talk with new people in Chavez Ravine, at church and at the store.

Soon, Juana was expecting their first child. It didn't take long for Tito to begin worrying. Instead of gaining weight, Juana seemed to be losing it. Often, she was too weak to leave the bed. Lencha, the curandera, visited and made special teas for Juana but Tito did not trust the woman.

“You need to go to a real doctor,” Tito told Juana. “There’s a good one at General Hospital. The boss’s wife goes to him.”

“Good for her,” said Juana, her face pale against the pillows. “I’m too sick to walk.”

“I’ll carry you,” Tito said. When he reached down to lift her, Juana began to scream and kick. He was so terrified that the baby would be hurt that he quickly backed out of the room. When he returned, the curandera was at his side. Juana rewarded him with a weak but grateful smile.

The next day when he came home from work, he spotted a black bag sitting on the table in the living room. He could hear voices coming from the bedroom. And then a stranger emerged, a tall and skinny Chinese man.

“I’m Dr. Eng, Juana’s doctor,” he said in a deep, rich voice.

Tito had never heard of Dr. Eng, so he studied the man with suspicion. “Are you a real doctor?”

The man gave a pleasant laugh. “Yes. I am. My office is in Chinatown, and I also deliver babies at the French Hospital.” Tito was so relieved at the mention of a hospital where Juana could go when her time came that it didn’t occur to him to ask why a Chinese doctor worked at a French hospital.

Dr. Eng made another house call to check on Juana later that week and soon Juana was back on her feet and bustling around, turning up the music as she cleaned the house and made tortillas, so they were fresh when Tito got home from work.

Her belly growing fast, Juana spent hours making smock tops and stretchy skirts. One day Tito came back later than usual because he stopped to see the French Hospital for himself. He wanted to make sure it was real. And it was. The sight of the respectable building reassured him, but he didn’t dare mention his little detour to Juana. She’d accuse him of not trusting Dr. Eng.

Besides, having their baby meant Juana would finally need to come out of Chavez Ravine and he didn’t want to upset her, especially now that she was so jolly.

Five months later, Juana woke with a terrible backache. By noon, she wandered from room to room, moaning, occasionally stopping to grip the back of a chair so hard her knuckles turned white.

Tito ran down the street to fetch the new car he’d bought to drive her to the French Hospital. But like magic, Dr. Eng appeared, walking up the dirt road carrying his black bag.

Tito rubbed his brow. “We didn’t call you,” he sputtered

“You didn’t need to,” said Dr. Eng, patting his shoulder. “A good doctor knows when it’s time.”

Tito followed him up the steps. "She needs to go to the hospital."

Dr. Eng stopped and regarded Tito with sympathetic eyes. The doctor was an impressive sight in a crisp white shirt and a pinstripe suit. A Fedora hat sat at a jaunty angle on his head. "The hospital is no place for Juana, young man. Most women around here have their babies at home and there's no need for you to worry. I delivered Juana myself right here, at this very house. But if you can bring Lencha to me, I can use her help." Without waiting for a reply, the doctor went into the house.

Juana labored the rest of the day and through the night but just as the sun came up to the sound of roosters crowing across Chavez Ravine, Tito heard the wail of a baby. A chubby angel with a thatch of dark curls.

"*Gracias dios*, it's a boy," Lencha whispered, one hand over her heart.

"I would have been happy with a girl," Tito murmured. But as he gazed down at his son, a tear slipped down his face and he couldn't imagine anything else.

Lencha shook her head. She had strong Indian features with black and silver hair in a braid that reached to her waist. "No, *mijito*, a son *is mas mejor*."

Tito didn't understand why a son was better, but the curandera had strange ideas. She'd covered Joe in hot tomatoes for the mumps and when he had a fever, she placed an egg in a glass of water beneath his bed. Joe swore her cures worked, but Tito thought it was all in his head.

Dark circles under her eyes, Juana smiled up at Tito, radiant and triumphant. Dr. Eng clapped Tito on the back. The doctor appeared as neat and tidy as the day before. Tito offered him a ride, but the doctor shook his head. "Thank you, Hector, but the walk will do me good." And off he went.

When a bill from Dr. Eng failed to arrive, he asked Juana about it. But Juana just shrugged. "Dr. Eng is a family friend."

Tito frowned. "Ai, Juana, but the man still needs to be paid. He can't go around delivering babies for free." Lencha charged fifteen dollars to midwife a baby, so he was prepared to pay at least triple for a real doctor.

Juana lowered baby Arthur into a basket lined with a blanket. At three weeks old he already had a nickname: Arky. "*Escuchame*, Tito. Even if you try to pay him, Dr. Eng won't take our money. He was my grandfather's friend and he promised to look after me."

"It's still not right," Tito muttered. But he vowed to himself this would be the last time he'd bring it up. There was no use upsetting Juana, who'd been in such a good mood since Arky's birth.

The playful side of Juana emerged as their grunting infant transformed into a mischievous baby. Everything he did delighted Juana. When he sent a

tortilla flying across the room, Juana collapsed into a fit of giggles. When he splashed water from the bathtub, making a mess, Juana splashed back. The house was filled with the sounds of their laughter, and when Arky was old enough to run, Juana chased him through the house. Not once did Juana say she was too tired to play with Arky.

The only time Tito saw Juana frown was when he mentioned going into town. She seemed more determined than ever not to go.

“But babe, my new boss just moved to Amador Street, right at the bottom of Loma. It’s his daughter’s *Quinceañera*. We *have* to go! He’s expecting us!”

Juana plucked Arky off the floor where he was playing with old spoons and tin cups. She hugged him so hard he gave a little cry. “Oh no we don’t,” she said. “Arky is too little. He’ll catch germs and get sick.”

“No, Juana. Dr. Eng was just here. You heard him. Arky is fine. We’re just going to a little party.”

“To you it’s a little party, *tonto*, but it’s not safe down there!” she cried, hoisting Arky to her hip. Then she stomped to the bedroom and slammed the door. A few seconds later the door creaked open, and Juana stuck out her head. “I’m not going and that’s final,” she shouted.

Juana and Arky stayed home while Tito marched down the hill, a gift in hand for the girl turning fifteen and an excuse ready for why he was going alone.

Two years went by, and Juana continued to have her way, staying in Chavez Ravine, content.

Pancha continued to buy fruits and vegetables for them when she shopped at Central Market on Saturday. Tito thought this was too much to ask of a woman with three children and a full-time job, but Juana didn’t trust him to buy the right things and Pancha insisted she was happy to do it. Tito slipped her extra money and occasionally bought the Lopez family a hundred-pound bag of flour or beans.

Juana put Arky in the little red wagon Tito bought downtown and pulled him along wherever she went in the three neighborhoods. Sometimes, after work, he’d arrive back in Bishop to discover an empty house. She’d leave no note, but Tito knew Juana loved to be outside when the weather was good. When he asked where she went, she’d reply, “Oh, into the hills.”

Chavez Ravine was full of coyotes. He could hear them at night. But she brushed off his concerns. “They don’t bother anyone. It’s dangerous down there. In town. Not up here.”

But danger was not far off, and when it happened, it unfolded right in front of their house. On Good Friday, Juana woke up determined to fix up the

biggest and fanciest altar to La Virgen de Guadalupe in all of Chavez Ravine.

Juana asked Tito to build a proper altar with a kneeler. When this was done to her satisfaction, at her direction, he attached a large American flag at one side and a smaller Mexican flag to the other of the freshly cleaned statue of La Virgen.

Juana and Pancha fussed over how best to drape some shimmery gold fabric and after much trial and error, stepped back and clapped their hands in delight.

When it was time for the finishing touch, Juana stood on a ladder and began attaching homemade paper flowers. Arky ran around in excitement. Then Arky knocked into the ladder and Juana came tumbling down with a shriek, hitting her head on a corner of the altar, and falling sideways onto the hard ground.

When Tito helped her to feet, her white teeth were bared, and her left arm drooped into an alarming U-shape. A gash on her forehead bled everywhere. Pancha whisked Arky into the house. Juana threw up in front of the altar. "Forgive me, lady," she cried to the brown virgin.

This time, Tito wasn't about to wait for Dr. Eng to magically appear. He scooped up Juana and lurched down the street to the car, Juana slamming her one good fist against his chest, as if he was the monster from the lagoon.

"Juana," he said firmly, "I'm taking you to the French Hospital." Then he stuffed her into the passenger seat.

"No!" she screamed.

He was frantic now, fumbling for the keys. "*Mujer!* Have some sense."

"No, Tito, no! I don't need to go. Just call Dr. Eng, please!"

Tito shook his head. Juana's arm and bloody mess of a head needed medical attention at a real hospital. "I will not let my wife bleed to death," he said, punching the gas.

Juana's cries grew louder, shriller, as they approached the bottom of the hill. It was a bad road, full of ruts and potholes, so he had to drive slowly and carefully so as not to jounce her injured arm. Then Tito noticed movement in the rearview mirror. It was Lencha, Pancha, Pancha's husband Gilbert and an old lady wearing a cap. Bertita, angrily waving a cane. They yelled at Tito to stop. Startled, he slowed down. And just as he did, Juana threw open the passenger side door with her good hand and leapt out. Tito slammed on the breaks.

"What the hell are you doing, woman?" he cried as he ran around the car.

Pancha embraced the now sobbing Juana. Gilbert, a big man, picked up Juana as if she weighed nothing at all. Tito stood there, too stunned to protest,

as Gilbert carried Juana back up the hill. It was a strange little procession. Not once did they look back at Tito.

Bertita hobbled up and lit a cigar. "Tonto," she said between puffs.

"Me? I'm a tonto? You're all crazy."

"Juana has no business outside Chavez Ravine," said Bertita, blowing smoke in his face.

Tito lowered himself onto the dirt road and buried his face in his hands. "But why? I don't understand."

Bertita patted his head and then ground the tip of her cane into his right foot. "Listen, *mijo*. Be happy for what you have. The city below is not for everyone. Some people are of this place and Juana is one of them."

"Pancha goes into the city," he replied. "Everybody does. Even you."

"Juana is different," said Bertita. "You should know that by now. And how about that, Tito? There is Dr. Eng." The old woman squeezed his shoulder and then limped off to greet the doctor, dressed in a dark blue suit and carrying his black bag.

Tito silently drove Dr. Eng and Bertita up to the house. Mrs. Perez, a middle-aged neighbor who always wore an apron with large pockets, carried Arky and was singing *Los Animalitos*. Arky, head on her shoulder, hiccupped.

Tito stood around feeling helpless. Isolated. These people of Chavez Ravine had a way about them. Sometimes, he felt like an outsider even though it had been his home for years. He thought about what Bertita said. That Juana was different. Didn't he know her best? Suddenly, he was filled with doubt. She may be his wife, but he'd never understood her strange insistence on never stepping foot outside of Chavez Ravine. No one else seemed to question this.

Dr. Eng stayed with Juana for a long time and fixed her up as good as if she'd been in the hospital. It took Juana a whole week before she'd speak to Tito. When she finally did, she said, "Don't you ever try to force me to leave again, and I mean it."

After that, Tito gave up. But soon, outside forces came to work against Juana. She was first to hear the rumor going around that something was going to happen to Chavez Ravine.

"Like what?" Tito asked.

"Somebody said they want to build a housing project," Juana replied, sprinkling water on a shirt she was ironing.

"But there's already houses here!" Tito protested. "And who's they?" But Juana didn't know.

An eviction letter arrived two days later, crumpled and tear stained by the time Tito came home. Juana clutched it in her hand as she dashed down the steps to meet him, a wild look in her eyes.

Tito read the letter right there on the road. It was short. No mistaking what it all meant. A public housing development would be built for families of low income and their solid little house was included in the land that would be used. Someone from the city would inspect their property and tell them how much it was worth. There was nothing in the letter about having a choice. The city would buy the house in several months.

Tito couldn't imagine living anywhere besides Chavez Ravine. He felt dizzy, emptiness swallowing him whole.

Neighbors gathered in the street. Tito left Juana inside crying and joined the group, gripping Arky's hot little hand. Everyone had received the letter. Pancha was furious.

"I won't move for all the money in the world," said Ruben Frias, a well-built man with bulging arm muscles earned from building roads.

"Your house is like a shack," said Pancha. "I don't think they'll give you much for it."

Ruben shrugged. "Yeah, it's kind of rickety. I don't have the money to fix it up."

Pancha sniffed. "You've got plenty of money on Friday nights to buy booze."

To Tito's surprise, Ruben laughed. "Ai, Pancha. You're so mean."

Pancha laughed, too. "You better believe it. I tell it like it is." There were nods all around.

"We're not going anywhere," said Gilbert, Pancha's husband. "Where else would we go? Every place else is more expensive."

"My sister says we should sell," said Teresa, who lived at the bottom of the road. "She wants us to take the money and build a place on their lot in Boyle Heights."

Pancha rolled her eyes. "Your sister can shut up already about Boyle Heights. I don't see what's so good about it."

"It's not so bad," Teresa muttered and then stiffly walked away.

"Traitor!" Pancha called after her.

There were discussions like this wherever Tito went in Chavez Ravine. Many people didn't want to leave but didn't know what else to do. A few seemed happy about a payout, more money than they had ever imagined.

As they waited for a visit from a city inspector, Juana began to complain of hot pains shooting through her head. She became prone to crying fits and

sometimes collapsed to the floor, where she'd sit and stare into space, frightening Arky. On a few occasions, she shouted at Tito and accused him of going to the city behind her back because he'd always wanted her to leave Chavez Ravine.

"No, Juana, no. I would never do that," he said. But she would not listen, convinced that he was to blame.

On Sundays, she stayed in bed, refusing to go to church. Mrs. Perez offered to help take care of Arky after hearing about Juana. With two teenage boys who were hardly ever home, she said she was happy to have a little one to care for. Tito insisted on paying the nice woman.

Tito walked to Loma and paid a nickel to borrow old Mr. Wheat's phone and called Dr. Eng. The doctor arrived that evening. He'd heard about the eviction letters and his eyes were troubled. When he finally emerged from the bedroom, his shoulders slumped.

"You must do everything you can to keep the house," he said to Tito. "She must stay in Chavez Ravine."

"But is she okay, doctor? Is she sick?"

"In a way, Hector, yes. It runs on the women's side of the family," he said, then patted Tito on the shoulder and turned to leave without further explanation.

Lencha waited on the porch, smoking a cigarette. She gave a little wave to Dr. Eng as he walked past, black bag in hand. When he was just a speck at the bottom of the hill, the curandera turned to Tito. "He's a good man, that one. But it's *ataque de nervios* and there's nothing you can really do."

Tito sank into a chair and accepted a cigarette. He lit it and coughed as he inhaled. "Lencha," he began. "I know you mean well. But if you're going to tell me you need to do one of those crazy things, like covering her in hot tomatoes, that's not going to work. This is serious."

Lencha took off a sturdy slipper and threw the *chancla* at him. He ducked and it hit the wall behind him instead. "I'm saying it's her nerves, dummy. They're making her sick. Her grandmother and mother suffered from them, too."

"What can I do?" Tito asked. He'd never felt so desperate.

"Just be nice to her. And keep her in Chavez Ravine as long as you can."

The advice filled him with a dread that followed him from day to day. He went out of his way to be kind to Juana, who'd taken to wandering the house like a ghost.

With Pancha he attended community meetings where there was lots of angry talk about fighting and staying on, but by this time enough people had

sold their homes and moved out and firemen had begun to set the empty buildings ablaze, filling the ravine with smoke. Juana stood on the porch, her hands shaking as she gripped the porch railing.

As the months went by, crews knocked down houses one by one. The neighborhoods began to look bare, stripped.

Eventually two *gringos* from the city knocked on the door. The men wore gray suits and sat in the living room, their knees drawn up, as if afraid they'd catch something.

"I'll get right to it," said the older man. He had small blue eyes, close together. "The best thing for you to do is accept our offer of ten thousand dollars. The longer you wait the less you're going to get. If you make us come back next month, you'll get no more than eight thousand. Now that's a lot of money and I see you have a little son you want to make sure ends up in a good place."

Juana stood in the kitchen doorway, holding Arky behind her as if to shield him from view. "This is a good place. My grandfather built this house," she said, her voice quivering with indignation. "There's a nice yard for Arky to play in. Why should we move into some stinking low-income housing?" Tito stared at Juana in surprise. It was the most spirit she'd shown in a long time.

The men regarded with Juana with blank expressions. Then the older one got to his feet and put on his hat. "Mrs. Garcia, whether you like it or not the city has made a decision and if you know what's good for you and your family here, you'll take what we're offering and get out."

The younger man also rose, speaking for the first time. It was late afternoon, and he already had a five o'clock shadow. "Don't make us come back. If you do, we'll bring the police, and they'll escort you out."

When the door shut behind them, Juana muttered, "Sons of bitches," and then repeated it in Spanish as if it needed translating. He'd take a cursing wife over a crying one any day. Tito crossed the room and hugged her while Arky patted his face and planted a *becito* on his cheek.

The next weekend Tito visited his friend Joe and heard about a family of eight who took a low-ball offer for their house. They could have got more but the city punished them for stalling and threatened them with the police.

Tito made up his mind right then and there, arranging a meeting with the man from the city. He went to his office in downtown Los Angeles and signed the papers. Tito did not dare tell Juana. Yet.

The next day he woke early and walked to the Elysian Park neighborhood just below La Loma. His boss had told him about a house for sale on Solano. And there it was. As perfect as could be, with a peaked roof and white roses

climbing up a chain link fence. It even had new linoleum on the floors and a terraced backyard full of fruit trees.

Tito bought the house. Juana would not be far from her beloved Chavez Ravine. He imagined her standing on the porch at night, listening to the howls of the coyotes.

Tito wished he could have found a place closer to the Bishop neighborhood, but it was the best he could do, and they were running out of time. They'd have a small mortgage, but Tito wasn't worried. He'd got a promotion at Southern Pacific, and they had extra savings in their bank account.

Tito was so nervous about telling Juana what he'd done that he kept the whole thing a secret for as long as he could. But then Pancha and Gilbert shocked them by announcing they'd sold up. So did Ruben Frias, Teresa Reyes and Arky's babysitter, Mrs. Perez. Even Joe and his family were moving. Only Lencha and Bertita would stay behind, joining the last of the stubborn holdouts.

Juana became wild with grief, screaming and crying and carrying on. When she finally calmed down, Tito had no choice but to tell her they too would move the following Saturday. This was met with a silence that frightened him.

At night, Juana laid on the bed with her eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. During the day, she went about packing, muttering and weeping. Still, Juana didn't say a word to Tito, who tried again and again to explain.

"You'll like the new house, babe," he said. "It's not very far, I swear. And there's a good school for Arky."

"The Palo Verde school is best," she replied. But the fight had gone out of her, her voice flat

"They're knocking down the school, sweetheart," he reminded her gently.

Saturday finally arrived. The gates to the houses were wide open and cars stood ready, crammed with boxes. Brooms and mops stuck out of windows; mattresses strapped to the tops of hoods.

Tito had hired movers, so everything was already at the new house. And then it was time to go.

As agreed, the Garcia's would go first. Mrs. Perez would deliver Arky later that morning, giving Tito and Juana time to unpack. Pancha and Lencha took turns hugging and kissing Juana, who clung to them for so long that Tito was finally forced to drag her to the car. Juana sat stone faced in the back seat, hands folded on her lap, face white.

As they headed down the hill, he spotted Bertita waiting at a corner. He pulled over and stopped the car. She stuck her head in the window and kissed

Juana, who reached out and grabbed the old woman by the wrist. For a moment, Tito thought Juana meant to haul Bertita through the window, but instead she kissed the palm of the old woman's hand with a little sob. Then Bertita handed something to Juana. A rosary.

Juana closed her eyes and murmured a thank you. As they continued driving, Juana made a sign of the cross, saying the Apostle's Creed, an Our Father and then began the Hail Mary's. She continued until they reached the very bottom of Chavez Ravine.

Juana cried out.

Tito couldn't bear to look at his wife, so he kept his eyes on the road. The prayers suddenly stopped, but he was so focused on getting to the house on Solano Street that it hardly registered.

When Tito pulled up with a sigh of relief, he dashed around to the car door. But there was no sign of his wife. A weight descended on his chest and a horrible taste filled his mouth. With stiff, cold fingers, he slowly opened the door, trembling at the terrible sight before him.

What had happened to Juana he could not say. All that was left was a sickening pile of coarse, dry ash. A monstrous, disintegrating death had come to Juana.

A sudden gust of wind blew the gray flakes into the air.

Tito watched, a scream rising in his throat, as they drifted toward Chavez Ravine.

About the Author

Debra Castaneda's recent works include the International Latino Book Awards gold medal winning *The Monsters of Chavez Ravine*, the first book in the Chavez Ravine series.

She is also the author of the young adult supernatural mystery series, *Surviving Hillside*, including *The Box in The Cuts*, *The Fault in The Cuts*, and *The Cave in The Cuts*, and a horror novelette, *The Root Witch: An Urban Legend Caught on Tape*.

After a career as a journalist in radio and TV, she now devotes her time to writing fiction. She lives with her husband in Capitola, California.

Other Books by Debra Castaneda

The Monsters of Chavez Ravine

A 2021 International Latino Book Awards Gold Medal Winner! Before Dodger Stadium, Dark Forces Terrorized Chavez Ravine.

The Night Lady

After dark, danger lurks in the ravine.

Surviving Hillside Series

Young Adult Supernatural Suspense Novels

The Box in The Cuts

Following The Clues Is As Deadly As Ignoring Them.

The Fault in The Cuts

Seven Teenagers. An 8.1 Earthquake. One Angry Ghost.

The Cave in The Cuts

Surviving 'til Graduation Just Got Scary.

The Root Witch: An Urban Legend Caught on Tape

A horror novelette.