

The Poor Rich Man's Wife

Dulce saw the grin on her husband's face. Silvy was neatly groomed and dressed in his best clothes. It was Holy Saturday, and she wondered if he expected her to go with him to mass at Saint Gertrude's.

"Are you going somewhere?" Silvy's father asked.

"I'm going to Vegas."

Dulce's eyes opened wide with surprise when she realized Silvy had no intention of going to church. The town of Las Vegas was sixty miles from the ranch.

"When will you be back?" Don Fernando asked.

"In a few days." Silvy looked toward Dulce who hadn't said a word to him since they sat down to eat. "Are you going to miss me?"

Dulce looked up from her plate. "Have a good time," she said, ignoring his taunt. She brushed back her hair, then touched the yellowing bruise below her eye. *It's tender, but it's almost healed. I can go out now.*

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"The cows are dropping their calves," Don Fernando said. "There's lots to do. Why don't you wait until the calving's done?"

Silvy scooped the last of his eggs onto the boat of his *tortilla*. "I told Gavilán what needs doing," he said before shoveling the food into his mouth.

Dulce smirked. *My, my, isn't he in a hurry? He's not going to stay. He's waited long enough. He hasn't been off the ranch in weeks, and he hasn't touched me since my suegro made him sleep in the bunk house.* When her father-in-law shook his head, she figured the old man didn't like Silvy leaving the foreman in charge, but she knew he had bigger worries, so she wasn't surprised when Don Fernando didn't insist that he stay.

Silvy wiped his mouth with his napkin, then he dropped it on his plate. He got up and walked behind Dulce's chair. She winced when he leaned over and kissed the side of her neck. "See you soon," he said before walking off.

"Bye," Dulce squeaked. "*Que le vaya bien.*" She shuddered, then she rubbed the goose bumps on her neck. "How's *Mamá*?" she asked Don Fernando.

"She's feeling better. She ate a little. Slept better, too."

Dulce watched him push the food about his plate. *Doña Consuela is dying, and he's afraid to admit it.*

"Aren't you hungry?" Don Fernando asked, noticing she had barely touched her own food.

"Not very." Dulce appreciated Don Fernando's concern. *If only I would have met someone like him, things would have been different.* She was grateful for the power he had over his son. Whenever Silvy hit her, he made him leave the house. *It's too late for regrets. Women don't divorce their husbands. It's just not done. Besides, how would I*

survive without a man to care for me? Maybe, if I'm nice to Silvy, he'll let me visit Maga.

Dulce's sister, Maga, lived on their father's farm with her husband and children. Dulce thought herself less of a woman because she had no babies. She felt cheated because, after eight years of marriage, she expected to have a house full by now.

Don Fernando excused himself and left to check on his wife.

Dulce watched him go. *What will happen to me when he's gone? One day Silvy's going to hurt me real bad. I'm afraid to get near him anymore.* She knew her husband didn't need an excuse to make her the target of his temper, and lately, she sensed he enjoyed watching her cower.

Dulce got up and walked to the window just as Silvy drove off in a black Packard sedan. The sunlight planted diamonds of dew in the tall grass of Guadalupita. She was glad to see Silvy go, but she was indignant at his eagerness to leave because she knew he looked forward to sleeping with some whore. *Why is it when a man cheats, no one cares, but if a woman ...* She bristled at the notion. *It's not fair!* Dulce sighed. She knew all men weren't like her husband. Her father and brothers were fine men. *I'm just unlucky,* she told herself. *Don Fernando, in his own way, is a good man, too. He loves his wife even more than he loves his ranch.*

When Gavilán lifted the lantern, Dulce saw the worried look on the foreman's face. In the lamp light, she noticed one of the cows in the pen struggling. The heifer grunted, her sides heaving. As she watched Gavilán peer between the rails of the corral, Dulce wondered why he wasn't sleeping off the drunk like the rest of the hands.

The rising sun would greet Easter, which marked the end of the Lenten Season when

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Catholics would once again commemorate life. After forty days of abstaining from liquor, eating meatless meals, refraining from dancing, and for some, even sex; some would celebrate life with a vengeance. Unable to wait until the end of *La Cuaresma*, the ranch hands had gone on a *peda*. There wasn't a sober man in the bunch.

The heifer dropped to her knees. "Oh, shit!" Gavilán said. The cow rolled over on her side. The foreman rushed to the gate.

"What's wrong?" Dulce asked, stepping into the light.

Gavilán jumped, then turned to see who spoke. "You gave me a start, *señora*. I didn't hear you come."

Dulce laughed. "I'm sorry. What's the matter?"

"A cow's in trouble." Gavilán unlatched the gate and entered the corral. Dulce followed. The foreman shoved and shooed the other expectant mothers away from the fallen cow. The heifer began to grunt; muted, pain-filled cries, inbred quiet so predators wouldn't hear them when they dropped their calves. "Will you hold the light, *señora*?"

"Sure," Dulce said, taking the lantern.

Gavilán knelt beside the heifer. "Lift it higher, *señora*." He picked up the cow's tail. "We have a backward calf here. They'll both die if it doesn't come out."

"Get it out then."

"Can't. There's no time. The calf's coming."

"Can I help?"

"This isn't something a lady like you can do, *señora*."

"I know about these things. I've seen animals born."

Manuel Soto, called Gavilán because of his hawk-like sight, studied her.

Dulce saw the doubt in his penetrating gray eyes.

“All right, *señora*. Bring the light closer.”

“Please call me Dulce. The calf's feet are pointing up. You're going to have to turn her, no?” The heifer lifted and twisted her head to look back at them, then the cow lay her head back down again. The pungent odor of manure pervaded the corral.

“You're right, *señora*.” Gavilán unbuttoned his shirt cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. When the cow quit straining, he pushed the calf's legs back inside her. Dulce started to speak, then gasped when the foreman plunged his arm into the heifer up to his shoulder. After righting the calf, Gavilán retrieved his hand, and Dulce wrinkled her nose at the watery ooze on his arm.

Gavilán removed a leather-braided *reata* from under his belt. He deftly looped the rope and pushed it inside the cow, then he tied the calf's hind legs together. Pulling out his arm and unraveling the line, he said, “Take hold of the rope.” The cows in the pen began to low and stamp in anticipation. Dulce grabbed the *reata*. Gavilán got up and stood behind the heifer when it began to grunt again. “Tighten the line,” he said. “When I tell you to, pull as hard as you can.”

Dulce nodded. It felt good to be useful.

When the heifer strained, Gavilán said, “Pull” and together they tugged the rope. The calf's hind legs came out right side up. “Wait.” Gavilán reached inside the mother and repositioned the calf. “Okay, when I say pull, pull.” Moments later, the cow began to pant. “Pull.”

The calf's rump came out. Heels dug in, the couple pulled with a renewed surge of effort. The rest of the calf's body was slowly freed. Its neck showed. Tugging with all

their might, they fell when the calf's head popped free.

"We did it! We did it!" Dulce smiled. She was happy for the first time in a long time. She sat up and scooted next to Gavilán.

"*Sí, señora.*"

Dulce's excited face shone in the lamp light. "Please call me Dulce."

"You should smile more often," Gavilán said, revealing a toothy grin. The elation left Dulce's face. "Smile."

Dulce laughed.

Gavilán pulled out a red paisley handkerchief from the hip pocket of his pants and wiped his hands. "Thanks for the help. I needed it."

"I'm sure you would have managed."

Gavilán shrugged and Dulce thought his modesty refreshing. "Thanks for letting me help." Perhaps it was because of their joined effort, but Dulce was grateful the foreman let go the hired man's habit of not noticing the boss' wife. Her conversations with ranch hands were perfunctory. She never got to know any of the men.

Gavilán stood and pulled Dulce to her feet. He untied the calf's legs, and as he cleaned its mouth and nostrils, Dulce noticed that his strong hands were gentle. The newborn sneezed and shook its head. The mother knelt on her front legs. Then the cow lifted her hind legs and scrambled onto her feet. She immediately began licking her baby, removing the birth scum.

Dulce stood next to Gavilán. They watched while the calf unsteadily got up on its spindly legs. The calf took a few shaky steps, then fell. Dulce reached out, wanting to help. The calf stood again. It wobbled toward its mother, nuzzled its velvety nose under

her, found the swollen udder, and began to nurse.

“They’ll be all right now,” Gavilán said. “I’ve never seen you take an interest in the running of the ranch before. I never thought you’d dirty your hands.”

Dulce sulked. “I know how to work. I work.”

“Maybe so, but I’ve never seen it.” Gavilán coiled the *reata* and tucked it under his belt. The night grew quiet like it had fallen asleep.

Dulce dismissed his criticism and welcomed his familiar tone. It invited conversation, so she talked. “Why didn’t you get drunk with the men?”

Gavilán shrugged. “Somebody’s gotta care for the cows.”

“They’re not your cows. Why should you care?”

He shrugged again, and Dulce knew he didn’t see it as work. It’s just something he enjoyed doing. She sensed Gavilán was a good man, unlike her husband, who cared for nothing but himself, and that was answer enough. She grasped Gavilán’s callused hand. It was warm to her touch. “Good job.” Her hand tingled in his.

Gavilán glanced at their joined hands. “What ... what are you doing out here so late at night?” The cows in the corral began to congregate around the nursing calf.

“I couldn’t sleep. I have that trouble sometimes. Sometimes, I just come out to look at the stars ... like tonight. Do you ever do that?” Dulce didn’t let go of his hand. She figured if Silvy could enjoy the companionship of other women, she would enjoy the company of this good man.

Gavilán reddened, but he didn’t pull free from her grasp. “Yeah, sometimes.”

It was a time of waiting. The oaks’ green leaves had made the transformation from

yellow to orange to red. A few leaves still stubbornly clung to their bare branches like scraps of brittle parchment. The *piñon* had fallen from the pine, and the tasty nuts had been harvested by scurrying squirrels and people crawling on their hands and knees. The chill awaited the first moisture to fall from the overcast sky, so it could turn the rain to snow. In the meantime, the cold air was content to replace the damp dew on the dry grass and fogged windows with icy frost.

The woman waited. Dulce smiled and put her hand on her swollen belly. The baby kicked. "He did it again! Look!" She placed Maga's hand under hers, so her sister could share in her excitement.

Startled by the sensation, Maga jerked her hand away when the baby kicked again. "How do you know it'll be a boy?"

"Look at me! If it was a girl, my belly would be way out to here!" Dulce held her hand out about six inches from her distended abdomen.

The sisters walked away from the ranch yard.

"Pregnancy suits you."

"You think so? I feel ugly. I waddle when I walk, and you should see me when I get out of a chair. I flail about like a fallen horse trying to get back on its feet."

"You're beautiful."

"Maga, look at my feet! They're swollen! My shoes are so tight, I don't know if I can fit in them much longer!"

"It'll pass."

"Not soon enough! I want to have my baby right now!"

"Be patient. You don't have long to wait."

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"You're not the one who has to pee every twenty minutes!"

Both women laughed.

"So how does Silvy feel about becoming a daddy?"

The bliss left Dulce's face. "I ... I haven't seen him in such a good mood since I can't remember when. *He hasn't hit me since I told him I was pregnant.* "He's happy actually. It's almost scary."

"You don't sound pleased." Maga's admonishing tone reflected her status as the older sister. The women walked hand-in-hand along a well-trodden path.

Dulce smiled. "I'm glad you've come." She squeezed Maga's hand. She never told her sister about the beatings ever since Maga told her to leave Silvy the first time he bloodied her nose. "I miss you."

Maga shivered at a gust of wind. "I should have stayed when Don Fernando died."

Doña Consuela's death was expected, but Don Fernando's demise a month later was unforeseen. Although Dulce lamented the loss of the old man's protection more than his companionship, her home was now empty, and she was lonely. "I'm glad you've come," Dulce repeated. The baby stirred again. "It's got to be a boy! A feisty one, too! So, how are you? How's Papá? Juan?"

"I'm fine. My oldest ... Abelino and Dolores are helping Papá while I'm gone, and Juan's herding sheep again. If it wasn't for the money he makes, Papá would have lost the farm. The prices for crops these days don't buy much."

A pained look pinched Dulce's face. *If I had married for love like Maga did, I'd still be living at home. My kids wouldn't be schooled, and my husband would be working too far from home to keep me warm at night.* The incessant honking of Sandhill Cranes

stole her attention. She turned toward the distant sound.

Dulce stared high overhead at the large birds that looked insignificant against the vast gray sky. The long-legged creatures began to circle, breaking ranks, abandoning their disciplined, v-shaped formation. Their honking intensified, becoming more frantic as they scrambled about the clouds. As she watched the panic, Dulce felt sorry for them. As if in answer to her prayer, one found his bearings, and the rest sensing his discovery, lined up behind him, reforming their ranks and following him unerringly south. *I wish someone would show me the way.*

Maga shivered. She let go of her sister. She placed her hands under her armpits. "It looks like we're going to have an early winter."

Dulce nodded. She long ago decided not to leave Silvy. She didn't want to give up her life of comfort. "Juan's a good man. *Tus hijos* will be good people, too. You did a good job of raising them. I hope that I'm ... That I'll be a good mother like you."

"I thought you'd never have a baby! How long has it been? How long have you and Silvy been married?" The wind stirred the withered grass alongside the path.

Dulce blanched and looked away. *No one knows*, she reassured herself. She cradled her swollen belly with both hands. *Whose eyes will my baby have?* "It's been eight years. How long are you staying?"

"I'll be here until the baby comes and for as long as you need me."

"It's getting cold. We better get back." Dulce turned and headed toward the ranch yard. *Silvy hasn't hit me in so long. Maybe he won't hurt me no more.*

The riders raced into the yard just as the women arrived. Silvy jerked back on the

reins, his horse tossing its head when the bit hurt its mouth. “*Agua!*” he demanded.

“*Sí, patrón.*” Gavilán dismounted and hurried to the well. He returned and handed the dipper to his boss, then he started to lead his horse away.

Silvy tossed the water on Gavilán's back. “*Cabrón!*” he snarled. “Get me water!”

Gavilán's sin was failing to wait for his boss to drain the cup, and if he still thirsted, to fetch more water. The foreman averted his eyes, avoiding the stares of the approaching women. He took the dipper from Silvy's hand and went to the well.

Silvy's anger vanished when he saw Dulce and Maga walking toward him. He smiled, then he dismounted and pulled off his gloves. As the women neared, he loosened the straps binding the chaps to his legs. “How's my wife and son today?” he cheerfully asked. Pulling Dulce close, he said, “Nice to see you again, Maga.”

“He's been real active, hasn't he, Maga?” Dulce's face was ashen, her voice shrill. “He wants to leave his cramped quarters and see the world!” A gust of wind struck and Dulce shuddered as she stared at Gavilán walking toward them carrying water. He came close enough for her to see his gray penetrating eyes. She placed a hand on her belly and wondered if her baby would have Silvy's brown eyes or gray eyes like his.