

José

Turning over on the woven sleeping mat, José bumped into his younger brother. He could see the early morning light through the cracks in the stick wall of his family's home. The sticks broke easily but were a type of wood that the termites wouldn't eat.

José could hear his mother feeding the chickens in the yard. Gently raising the thin bedsheet that kept the bugs off at night, José sat up and climbed over Salvador and his tiny sister Rosita. Careful not to wake them, he replaced the sheet and stepped onto the dirt floor.

This was José's favourite time of the day and, as he stepped outside, he breathed deeply the clean morning air. When his mother saw him, she smiled. Her smile had not always been so sad. She had been troubled ever since his older brother Juan was taken away by the police and his father left to work in the mountains. He tried not to think about it. He was nine years old and the oldest child at home so his mother needed him to be strong.

He smiled at his mother and walked to the well on the other side of the yard that he had helped his father and Juan dig. Only four tugs on the rope brought up a bucket of water. He felt blessed not to have to walk the two kilometres for dirty creek water or the five kilometres to the river like most of the villagers. In 20 minutes he had enough water for the chickens, pigs, today's washing and for breakfast. Then he watered the chili pepper plants. The thin green peppers were getting longer.

"Mama, mama," came the call from inside the hut as four-year-old Rosita and seven-year-old Salvador jumped up off the sleeping mat and ran out of the hut. Both wore the wonderful hats their father had given them for Christmas.

Mother made coffee and hot salted tortillas for breakfast. Eating silently, watching his family, José's chest filled with warmth. Thinking about the day, he remembered they had a little cheese to put on the tortillas they would have for dinner that night. He could hardly wait. "It is another day and more good things are going to happen," he thought as he and Salvador picked up their machetes and headed off to the coffee plantation.

This week they were cutting down all the weeds to get ready for planting. It was harder than burning them, but it took longer and gave them more money. Maybe mama could buy a coconut with the extra money they would earn.

After chores were done on the coffee plantation, José had an hour before dinner to work with the school teacher. José hoped he would hear more of the story about the girl in the city and practise his writing. It was fun to help the little ones and listen to them read. Hearing Salvador read aloud made him proud. But José knew that, as much as they all might want to go on in school, learning to read and write and do simple arithmetic was all the schooling that anyone in his family was going to have. It would not be long before he would have to leave home to find work to help support the family.

However, it was only three weeks until Holy Week when he could wear his new white cotton shirt and listen to the choir sing. Holy Week was always a special time in Brazil, especially Easter Sunday, the last day of the week-long events. Maybe his father and uncle would come back and sing his favourite song after dinner that night. It was so exciting to see everyone dressed in their best shirts and dresses singing and dancing.

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