

THE HOME HE NEVER HAD

BY JIM MERSEREAU

Raphael Cortez was in a bad mood again. Aimlessly driving the streets of this small Mexican border town, he had no place special to go. He was middle-aged, no family, lived by himself, and spent most his time alone. People considered him to be grumpy and fussy, and he knew it was true. He didn't like being that way it's just how he was.

The dirt streets of the poor neighborhood were narrow and potholed, but mostly empty, so he was surprised to see traffic congestion up ahead. He was even more surprised when he discovered the cause. El Arca! His blood began to boil.

"El Arca", or "The Ark" in English, was a small orphanage located just south of the border. The Director, Jose Cruz, and his American wife Cindy cared for thirty-five orphaned and abandoned children.

As he sat there looking at the dozens of cars parked in the yard and blocking the road, Raphael seethed. His thoughts were on the children. Most of them came with their parents from other parts of Mexico. The plan was always the same; the family would cross illegally into the United States, find a low-wage job most Americans didn't want, and settle-down to enjoy a standard of living unknown in their native country.

But somewhere along the way things went wrong; perhaps smugglers robbed and killed the parents then abandoned the children. Maybe the parents died in the desert from the extreme heat and the children were fortunate enough to be rescued by U.S. Border Patrol agents. Or sometimes, worst of all, the parents simply left the children and went on without them.

By many means, some more tragic than others, the children ended up in a place like this. But this place, El Arca, was overflowing with children – more than they had room for. The big rambling house was packed. The upstairs bedrooms looked like an old sailing ship with hammocks strung from ceiling to floor, and as far as Raphael was concerned, that was unacceptable. Some of the children would have to be moved to another facility.

Getting out of his car he headed for the house. He knew what people thought of him, "Raphael Cortez, proper and grim; fussy and precise; a stern Social Worker from the Department of Child Welfare; an unfeeling bureaucrat." "Well, that's ok" he fumed, "Let them think what they want."

His chosen mission in life was to inspect the numerous small orphanages along the U.S. / Mexican border and he did so with cool, unemotional efficiency. In fact, he was proud of it. He had inspected El Arca two months earlier and made it clear he was unhappy with the crowded conditions. He also let it be known he didn't particularly like Jose and Cindy either.

There was a crowd at the door making their way in and Jose was greeting them one-by-one. "Welcome, welcome to El Arca my friends. Come in, come in please!"

Jose Cruz, five feet four inches tall and at least two hundred pounds. His big belly jiggled as he laughed. To Raphael he seemed like a Mexican Santa Claus, or a glad-handing small town

mayor, or maybe a little of both. “That smile won’t last long once he sees me,” Raphael thought to himself.

As Jose turned to greet the next guest he found himself face-to-face with Raphael. Quickly recovering from surprise Jose greeted him, “Welcome Senor Cortez. This is a surprise. Please, please come in. To what do we owe the honor of your visit today?” He stepped aside so Raphael could enter.

As he brushed past Raphael snapped, “I was driving by and noticed the crowd. Why would you bring all these people into an already overcrowded children’s home?”

Somewhat flustered Jose said, “Oh, but Senor Cortez, these people are all friends of El Arca. They’ve come today to see the great work we’re doing and to donate the funds needed to provide adequate space.”

Talking too fast and stumbling over his words he added, “I can assure you it’s only a matter of time, and not too much time at that, when we’ll have an entire new wing and many new bedrooms. You’ll see sir, it will happen very quickly.”

“Will it now?” Raphael practically sneered, “I suppose we’ll see.” Turning dismissively he said over his shoulder, “I think I’ll look around a bit, thank you.”

Reluctantly Jose left him to wander on his own. “This man can cause us trouble,” he worried. Jose knew he had nothing to hide. He and Cindy were committed Christians who had dedicated their lives to loving and caring for needy children in the Name of Jesus. It’s true that El Arca was crowded, and sometimes they ran low on food, but these children were well-cared for and loved. Jose had faith that the Lord would provide for His children and would give him wisdom in dealing with Raphael Cortez.

He watched as Raphael worked his way through the kitchen, out the back door, and onto the porch where little Leo was playing with his new Chihuahua puppy. Leo had only been at El Arca for three months. His father drowned trying to swim the river between Mexico and the United States. The police found the boy the next day and brought him here.

As Jose watched through the window he noticed something startling – the normally stoic Raphael Cortez was *smiling* and talking to Leo. Jose prayed something good was happening.

Raphael couldn’t get over the resemblance. This boy looked so much like the pictures he’d seen of himself at that age, and the similarities didn’t stop there. “The child must have lost his parents too or he wouldn’t be in a crowded orphanage,” he thought to himself. As he watched the boy he could feel his heart start to ache.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Leo” he said softly. The boy was shy but polite.

“Well Leo, my name’s Mr. Cortez.” “That’s a nice dog you have there. What’s his name?”

“Hercules!” Leo said with a big smile.

“Hercules?” Raphael burst-out laughing at the absurdity of naming this pocket-sized pipsqueak of a pooch after the strongest, most muscle-bound hero in Greek mythology. Stifling his laughs Raphael said, “Well, Hercules is a good name.” Then in a softer tone he asked, “Leo, can you tell me why you’re here? What happened son?”

Instantly the smile was gone. Sadness washed over the boy's face as he hung his head. After a moment he quietly explained, "My Dad died in the river. We never made it to the United States. The police brought me here."

Again Raphael was struck by the similarities. He knew this pain only too well.

"I'm sorry son. You must miss him. Where's your mother?"

"She died when I was born," the boy replied, head still hanging. "It was just me and my Dad."

Raphael's stomach was beginning to knot-up. This was too real for him, too much like his own story.

From inside the house there was a burst of laughter. Jose was loudly entertaining his guests with some story or joke. At the sound of Jose's voice Leo's head rose and the smile returned.

"But at least I'm here," he said. "As long as I'm here I'll be ok."

The comment startled Raphael. "You *like it* here?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yeah" Leo said, becoming more animated. "Jose and Cindy love me and take care of me, and Jose's lots of fun. He lets me ride on his back and pretend he's my horse."

"You feel safe and loved here?" Raphael asked, clearly struggling with the idea that an orphan might be well-cared for in an orphanage.

Leo nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah!" "And the other kids are like brothers and sisters I never had before. And I've got Hercules too!"

As he considered what he was hearing it slowly began to dawn on Raphael that things were different here. There was something unique about El Arca. It felt like, well, like a home. And he had to admit he had sensed it when he walked in that first time. There was an atmosphere of warmth and love that you could actually feel – it seemed to fill the air and gather you in. He remembered the sounds of laughing children echoing through the house and delicious smells that floated from the kitchen. At the time it had all been a bit distracting as he'd tried to focus on his inspection.

Standing there with Leo and Hercules, Raphael was suddenly struck by the realization that this was the kind of place he had longed for, and dreamed of, as a sad and lonely little boy in an orphanage far different from this one. In fact, now that he thought about it he realized this was exactly the kind of home he had always longed for – even as an adult. His dream had always been to have a big comfortable home filled with happy people and lots of love.

It seemed to Jose that Raphael stayed with Leo a long time. Later, Jose saw him in the front yard talking with some of the other children too. As the afternoon wore on the guests began to leave, and enough financial commitments were made to cover the needed expansion.

The last guest to leave was Raphael Cortez – but it wasn't the same Raphael Cortez who had arrived a few hours earlier; it was obvious to Jose that something had changed, this man was different, but how? "What happened out there with Leo?" he wondered.

Standing at the door, hand on Jose's shoulder, Raphael explained, "Jose, when I was five years old my parents and I left our home in Southern Mexico to make a new life for ourselves in Texas." Pausing, he drew a deep breath and continued, "But just before crossing the border we were attacked by bandits. They killed my parents and stole our money. I escaped by hiding behind some rocks. Later the police found me and took me to an orphanage not far from the border."

Jose could see how difficult this was for Raphael so he kept quiet and just listened. “I lived in that orphanage for thirteen years and they were the worst years of my life,” he said. “The people who ran that place were only interested in the money they received from the government. We children were packed in like sardines, sometimes two or three to a bed. We were poorly fed and beaten if we complained.”

“What an awful way for a child to grow-up,” Jose blurted out before he could stop himself. “That’s why I was so angry with you,” Raphael sighed. “I thought El Arca was just another warehouse for unwanted children. But when I came across Leo I thought I was seeing a picture of myself at that age – only Leo was obviously happy but I never was.”

He choked-up for moment and then softly continued, “The more I talked to Leo the more I was struck by the fact that he felt loved and safe here. Then as I spent time with the other children I realized they all felt the same way.” Raphael paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts, “Jose,” he said, “It’s obvious that what you and your wife are doing here is special, it’s different. I want you to know that none of the children will be taken away from you. I’ll make sure you’re given the extra time you need to complete the expansion. In fact, I’ll help you with it.”

As Raphael drove away he reflected in amazement at what had just happened to him. For so many years he’d worn those painful childhood memories like a heavy old coat. But in one afternoon so much of the grief and hurt seemed to just melt away. He felt like a new man, a happier man. Instead of the simmering bitterness that was usually brewing up inside his heart and distorting his perception of the world, there now seemed to be a warm glow deep inside. And he even found himself wondering if perhaps, in some way, El Arca could become for him the home he’d never had.