

# Mañanaland



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# One

Somewhere in the Américas, many years after once-upon-a-time and long before happily-ever-after, a boy climbed the cobbled steps of an arched bridge in the tiny village of Santa Maria, in the country of the same name.

He bounced a fútbol on each stone ledge.

In the land of a hundred bridges, this was his favorite. When he was only a baby, Papá, a master stonemason and bridge builder, had carved his name on the spandrel wall for all to see.

*MAXIMILIANO CÓRDOBA*

On his bridge, Max liked the going up of it.

He liked that when he reached the threshold, the deck breached Río Bobinado in a long bumpy alley. He dropped the ball and dribbled it toward

the middle of the deck, bouncing it off the sides of his dusty huarache sandals.

Here above the keystone, he could see all of his world before him and the river below, curving away from Santa Maria, looping back and curving away again. He moved his hand to mimic the river's erratic path as it circled the islets and giant boulders. Why was Río Bobinado so indecisive?

Max glanced over his shoulder to make sure Papá hadn't caught up. "Once . . ." he whispered, ". . . a gargantuan serpent as wide as twenty houses and as long as three states could not decide whether to slither west toward the ocean or east toward the mountains. As soon as the serpent chose one direction, the other seemed far more appealing. Back and forth it went, side-winding across the earth, its body leaving a huge chasm in its wake. The chasm eventually filled with rain and became the river."

Satisfied, Max smiled. This was his favorite spot to make up stories and wonder about big and bewildering things: How long it would take to grow

up and become a man, if he would ever see what lay beyond the horizon, and why his mother left and whether he'd ever meet her.

Max knew that Papá didn't like big questions of any kind, especially ones about the past or the future. Some of them even seemed to cause him pain. Max couldn't count the times Papá had instructed him to "stand firmly in the reality of today or life will only disappoint you tomorrow."

He pushed Papá's words aside and gazed out at the village. The more prominent houses—greens, yellows, blues—hugged the riverbanks. The spire of the chapel, Our Lady of Sorrows, pointed toward the heavens. Citrus orchards and grape fields bordered the outskirts of town. Nestled in the foothills on dirt roads, modest white stone cottages perched like patient doves at roost. Max shaded his eyes until he spotted his. Was Buelo already cooking dinner with Lola at his side, begging for scraps?

He let his gaze continue upward toward a jagged cliff where a stone tower loomed. Everyone

called the stronghold La Reina Gigante, the giant queen, because she looked like the most powerful piece on a chessboard. Max loved that wherever he went in Santa Maria, he could see at least the merlons and crenels of her crown, as if she was always watching over him. He even had a faint memory of sitting at her feet while red blossoms rained upon him. Had it been a dream?

The palace surrounding La Reina Gigante had once been majestic, too. But that was decades before the cannons of ancient armies demolished the roof, an earthquake unsteadied the walls, and a war in the neighboring country of Abismo forced legions of people to flee a dictator, using the ruins as a safe place to hide. Some said these “hidden ones” were poor innocents—women and children. Others said they were malicious criminals, filthy beggars, and the unwanted.

No one had ever seen a hidden one to know for sure. But it was rumored that their spirits returned each year on the wings of the peregrine falcon.

Sometimes when heavy mist shrouded the hills and Santa Maria fell silent, their ghosts could be heard whispering prayers to the giant queen for her protection and guidance, as if she was a saint or a guardian angel. *Everyone* knew someone who knew someone who had heard them.

The entire property around La Reina Gigante and the ruins was fenced, abandoned, and off-limits. Only Papá had permission from the mayor to commandeer the rubble to build new bridges. For as long as he could remember, Max had begged Papá to take him to see La Reina and the ruins up close. He'd be a hero among his friends if he was the first boy to cross the haunted gates! Just because Papá didn't believe in ghosts didn't mean they weren't there. Maybe this summer Papá would finally take him. He *was* almost twelve.

Max leaned over the capstones, warm from the afternoon sun, and waited for Papá to catch up. In the river, he saw half of his head reflected: a mop of black curls, heavy eyebrows, and caramel-colored

eyes. Buelo called them tiger eyes and said they were a sign of strength and determination. Chuy called them leche quemada eyes, like their favorite milk and brown sugar candy. Some of the boys at school called them devil eyes. Max did his best to ignore them. But he wondered if the boys knew something about him that he did not. Was he filled with badness? Still, they were his mother's eyes and one of the few things about her he could claim. That, and a tiny silver compass on a leather cord that once belonged to her. He patted his chest and felt it beneath his shirt.

As he tossed a pebble into the river, he let the rippling water turn his heavy thoughts to happier ones. School was out, and tryouts for the village fútbol team were in five weeks. Like all his closest friends, he dreamed of making the team.

Max picked up the ball and threw it at the parapet, letting it ricochet back so he could catch it. The bumpy stones sent the ball in unpredictable directions, forcing Max to hover and anticipate. He



kicked it hard, and when it hit the wall and flew back at him, he batted it down.

“Bravo!” Papá yelled. “Don’t unsettle any of the facing though. Or I’ll have repairs.” His cheeks flushed with ruddy circles and his forehead wrinkled from his usual troubled frown.

“You know I can’t kick as hard as you,” said Max. Papá was broad shouldered and solid, a wall of strength and muscle. He and Buelo had both played goalie on Santa Maria’s national team, and Max wanted to one day do the same. He was already as tall as both of them, but scrawny.

Max kicked the ball up and caught it in his hands. “Do you remember that tryouts are next month?”

“It’s hard to forget when you remind me so often.” Papá almost smiled.

“I was wondering . . . My fútbol shoes are *nearly* too small and the toes will need wrapping soon. If I had a pair of Volantes, the ones with the fancy

wings on the side, I'd *surely* make the team." He looked at Papá hopefully.

"Your shoes are fine for now. And expensive ones that we can't afford won't make you a better player. A world of disappointment comes from wishing for what you cannot—"

Before Papá could finish, a falcon swooped overhead, low enough that both he and Max ducked. Its sickle-shaped wings were splayed and taut. The head and hooked bill stretched forward, baring a white neck and speckled breast. They shaded their eyes, mesmerized by the silent flight.

"It's so big," said Max as it caught a current and soared away.

"Peregrine," said Papá. "A female that has come back to nest."

Whose spirit did it bring on its wing? wondered Max. "They say—" he started, then thought better of repeating the superstition. "They say they come back to the same spot every year."

Papá nodded. "It's true. But I haven't seen one

that large for a long time, and it is a little late to nest. Others have already come and gone.” He put an arm around Max’s shoulder and hugged him to his side. “Let’s go, slowpoke.”

“Me? Slow?” Max quickly dribbled the fútbol across the deck and called over his shoulder, “I’m going to meet Chuy at the field, and I’ll *still* beat you home because you have to stop and talk to everyone!”

“Come home right after. Buelo went fishing this morning and dinner will be ready in an hour or so. I don’t want to have to come looking.”

“Okay!” Max yelled back. Papá had only recently allowed him to go to the field on his own. Max didn’t want to give him a reason to take back the small freedom, or upset him. Saturday was Papá’s night out with his friends and Max’s night in with Buelo, and he wanted to keep it that way.

By the time Max reached the bridge’s landing, he felt as free as the soaring peregrine. Summer was the infinite sky before him. He had months to

swim in the water hole, play fútbol with his friends, and get ready for tryouts. Tonight, he would go to sleep with a belly full of fish after an evening of trading stories with Buelo—fantastical tales about dragons and serpents, or river monsters and trolls . . .

He clutched the ball to his chest and jumped toward the bank, taking two steps at a time.

On his bridge, he even liked the going down of it.