TIMES WERE POOR FOR THE ADOBE MAKER and his family, who found
themselves living in a desert of nopales, scorpions, and despair.

In fact, the whole village, once a place of great bounty, was troubled.
Chickens laid rocks, cornstalks broke like straw, wells dried to a whisper,
and cows gave curdled milk. Even the apple trees drooped with sadness.

“A bruja has put a curse on the place,” people whispered in the market
and after church. The townsfolk prayed hard to La Virgen de Guadalupe to
remove the evil they felt sure was caused by an unknown witch in their
midst—a witch who carried a grudge against the village. They could think
of no other reason for these sorrowful days.

Naturally, no one wanted new bricks, for there was no reason to build
anything. Francisco the adobe maker dreaded coming home at the end of each day with only sorrow. His second wife would not let him forget his failure to find work.

This day was no different. “Hombre, you are worthless! We have nothing to eat,” she yelled. “¡Nada!”

The adobe maker felt worse for his children, Jaime and Gabriela, who went to bed with stomachs growling like mountain lions. They had always been poor, even before these hard times, but they were rich in spirit. They didn’t complain and always smiled, just like their mother, who had died when they were babies.

“Maybe tomorrow you will find work, Papi,” Jaime said, bringing him a cup of weak coffee.

“I know you will soon sell some bricks. They are the best in the country,” Gabriela said, holding his rough hand.

“Go to bed,” the wife ordered, and kissed each child on the cheek. Her lips were cracked as a thirsty riverbed; she puckered them as if eating a rotten lemon.

Jaime sensed something bad was going to happen. Madrasta, as they called their second mother, had never kissed him or his sister before.

The boy always wanted to ask Madrasta why she did not love him and Gabriela. They tried their best to be good, but their stepmother said they were ungrateful children. And those words hurt worse than a slap. So he just said, “Buenas noches, Madrasta.”
After the children went to bed, the wife threw open the pantry door.

"Just look, Francisco. We only have a few beans, one skinny conejo, and three tortillas to eat," she told the adobe maker.

The noise woke Jaime and Gabriela, who crawled out of their straw bed to listen through their bedroom door.

The wife slid closer to her husband and said hoarsely, "Tomorrow, when we gather wild grass for your bricks, we shall take the children and leave them in the desert. If we keep having to feed them as well as ourselves, we'll all die."

Francisco stood up. "I will not abandon my children."

"You must!" Then the wife turned soft and touched his hand. "Do you want to see them starve? Do you want to watch them waste away to bones and fingers? If we leave them in the desert, they will be in God's hands, and that will be a blessing."

The adobe maker wept, and Madrasta knew she would have her way, wicked though it was.

Jaime and Gabriela crept back to bed.

"What do we do, hermano?" Gabriela shivered under the rags that were their bedclothes.

"I will think of something. Go to sleep, chiquilla."

When the house was silent and the moon high as a dream, Jaime left his bed, went outside, and collected some small stones that shone in the moonlight like jeweled rosary beads. He placed them in a little bag.
“Wake up.” Madrasta shook them in their bed the next morning. “Today, you will come with your father and me. Here’s your breakfast.”

She handed them each half of a dried corn tortilla.

“It’s time to go, mis hijos,” their father said gently, but he would not look into their faces.

As they walked, Jaime dropped the shiny pebbles behind him. Gabriela smiled and squeezed his hand.

In the shade of a tall saguaro, Madrasta ordered the children to rest, while she and their father went in search of wild grass.

Their father kissed the top of their heads. “I love you, hijos.”

“Vámonos, Francisco,” Madrasta commanded.

Gabriela nibbled on the tortilla as she watched her father and Madrasta gather the brittle grass, but she soon fell asleep in her brother’s arms. Jaime, too, eventually nodded off.

When they woke, Jaime and Gabriela were in darkness. The moon was like the yellow eye of a monster.

Gabriela cried, “Jaime, they’ve really left us! We’ll be eaten by wild animals.”

“No, sister. ¡Mira!” He pointed to the shiny rocks he had dropped on the way. “These will lead us home.”

When morning came, they were in their beds. Their father kissed them, joy in his tired eyes.

Madrasta frowned at the sight of the children.
JAIME AND GABRIELA

“How dare you wander off like that yesterday. Now, go do your work,” she ordered. And that was all she said to Jaime and Gabriela all day until it was time to go to sleep.

“Good night, Papi. Good night, Madrasta,” the children said as they went to bed.

Later, Jaime and Gabriela woke to the sound of Madrasta’s voice.

“Francisco, we must take them out even farther into the desert.”

“No! Their return was a sign from el Señor.” The adobe maker pointed to heaven.

The second wife forced out a tear. “My husband, it is the only way. They will live in el cielo as angels—never to be hungry again.”

The adobe maker stood. “In the morning, I am going to the next town to see if I can sell my bricks. God gave us another chance to be good.”

Then he went to bed, while Madrasta hummed to herself, a song only she knew.

“Jaime, do not worry. We are safe.” Gabriela yawned.

“Just in case, I will get more shiny pebbles,” he replied.

When the moon rose later that night, the boy tiptoed to the door but found it locked. He shivered with the cold of fear and frustration.

The next morning, their father left very early. Jaime and Gabriela fed measly bits of grain to the chickens and sang to them in hopes they would lay something besides rocks.
Madrasta called to the children, “We are going to find grass for your father’s bricks. Here is half of a tortilla. Don’t eat it all now or you’ll be hungry later.”

“But Madrasta—” Jaime started to say.

“Quiet. Don’t you want to help your father?” Madrasta’s smile was thin and frightening.

So off they went. Gabriela held tight to her brother’s hand. Jaime winked, for he was dropping bits of his tortilla behind him so they could follow the trail home.

After they had traveled a long distance, Madrasta pointed to a tall yucca plant. “Rest there. I will be back soon.”

Jaime and Gabriela closed their eyes. Sleep came easily because they’d had nothing to eat. Their tortilla was on the trail.

When they awakened, the sun had already slipped from the sky. Gabriela again cried that they were lost.

“No, no . . .” Jaime said, but his mouth turned down as he saw a mouse take away the last bit of tortilla and, with it, the chance of finding the way home.

Gabriela cried harder. Jaime held her close and told her not to worry. He sang her a hymn they had learned in church.

The next morning, they searched for home, and the next and the next, eating piñon nuts and sucking water out of cactuses, for a desert has no pity.
JAIME AND GABRIELA

“Jaime, tengo hambre.” Gabriela rubbed her empty belly.
He put his arm around her. “I know, chiquilla.”
Then the shadow of a shiny black crow crossed over Jaime’s face. One
of its wings curled, and the bird dipped as if pointing the way to some-
thing.
Jaime shaded his eyes with his hand. “That cuervo wants us to go over
there, Gabriela.”
“But crows are evil, remember, Jaime?”
“That’s an old wives’ tale. Let’s go.”
They hurried until they reached a small house. But it was no ordinary
house.
Surrounded by desert willow trees, the house was made all of pan
dulce—round, perfect sweet breads, topped by sugars of many colors. The
roof tiles were tamales—plump, steaming, spicy, and inviting.
“Are we in heaven, hermano?” Gabriela asked.
“I don’t know where we are,” he said. “But I’ve never seen so much food
in one place.”
They ran to the house and stuffed bits of the wall into their mouths,
then climbed up a tree and ate some tamales. Their stomachs grew full and
sore because they had forgotten what it was like to eat more than half a tor-
tilla. They grabbed their middles and moaned, but smiled and kept eating,
afraid the house would disappear like rain in the desert.
“Who is eating mi casa dulce?” rattled a voice.
Jaime and Gabriela stopped in mid-bite. Out of the door came a woman wrinkled like time, her hair in white braids; she was walking with a cane made from the thighbone of a horse. They took a step back, but the woman smiled.

"Pobrecitos, pobrecitos. Come inside, I will give you something better to eat than my house," she said.

"Gracias, señora." The children bowed.

Inside, the casa dulce was neat and smelled of fresh bread. Gabriela also noticed another odor, which she couldn’t recognize and made her uneasy.

From a wall filled with hanging hierbas of all kinds, the old woman cut pieces of a dried chamomile flower and began to boil water.

Surely, this was a wonderful place for cooking, with its many large pots and pans. But most wondrous was the mud-brick oven. It was as large as an outbuilding, with an iron door as tall as a man.

"You are lost, no?" the woman said.

The children nodded.

"Times are hard, and children often are lost and hungry. Sit, children, sit." She pointed to a table and chairs.

Before them she placed large bowls of menudo, a spicy stew of hominy and tripe, and stacks of tortillas the size of wheels. They ate and ate.

"You may call me Sombra, niños," the old woman said, grinding herbs in her stone molcajete.
When they were so full they could barely move, Sombra led them to a featherbed in another room so they could sleep. But throughout the night, Jaime turned and turned like a worm caught by the large cuervo that had guided them to Sombra’s house. He dreamed of sweet breads that nibbled at him and of hell’s fire in the big oven.

Someone grabbed his arm the next morning. It was Sombra.

“Mi comida,” she chanted over and over as she dragged Jaime outside and threw him into a cage. This cage was made not of pan dulce but of steel and sinfulness. Gabriela begged Sombra to free her brother. But the woman turned the key to the big lock and placed it on a string around her neck.

The viejita pointed a scrawny finger at Jaime. “I will fatten you up and eat you for my dinner, because nothing tastes so good as a chubby little boy.”

She turned to Gabriela. “You will help me cook for your brother. As a reward, I will eat you last.”

Over the next few days, Gabriela’s tears went into every dish they cooked for Jaime—and there were many: chicken with mole sauce, made from chilies and chocolate; arroz with large chunks of goat meat; burritos as round as their father’s arm.

“Why do you eat children, Señora Sombra?” Gabriela asked while they made chorizo and eggs.

Sombra scratched her hairy chin. “They keep me young. I am two hun-
dread years old, so I stay alive by eating their youth. Children also taste of innocence and sweetness—that is something grown people lose through the years."

The *viejita* grinned, showing her yellow teeth. "Tomorrow, I shall gobble down your brother and his youth so that I will look only *one* hundred years old."

That night, Gabriela sneaked out to see her brother. "What shall we do? Sombra wants to eat you."

"I cannot help, Gabriela. You alone can save us."

"I will try, Jaime."

They held hands through the bars and prayed for strength and an idea that would free them both.

That night in her bed, Gabriela thought of the great oven, and a plan grew in her mind like a grain of wheat gone wild—it grew into hope.

The old woman readied her pans the next morning, clanking them, banging them together.

"If you *must* cook my brother," Gabriela said to the *viejita*, "I know how to make a chili that he loves to eat. That is the way he would like to be cooked."

Sombra licked her lips with her snakelike tongue. "You are a good girl. I will chew slowly when it is your turn."

"*Gracias.*" Gabriela bowed.
Gabriela told Sombra how much onion, cumin, and lard to add. "The oven must be very, very hot so that he will cook well."

Sombra threw in logs. Although the heat curled the ends of her hair, Gabriela said, "That is not hot enough."

"Girl, are you stupid? This is hot enough for anything." Sombra opened the oven, the heat almost knocking her back.

"It needs to be even hotter for the best meal you will ever eat," Gabriela said.

"See, I will show you, silly girl." The viejita leaned close to the flames. "It couldn’t get any hotter."

Gabriela took a breath, grabbed the key from Sombra’s neck, and pushed the old woman into the oven. She slammed the door shut, praying for forgiveness, even though Sombra was a sister of sin.

Outside, Jaime watched a red fireball shoot out from the chimney and into the sky.

Gabriela freed her brother, and they hugged. "You are smart and brave, mi hermana. You have saved me," he said.

"But how do we get home, brother?"

"I’m not sure, but for now, we have each other and our lives."

While Gabriela gathered food to take with them, Jaime searched the rest of the casa. He spotted a plain-looking box under Sombra’s bed. The glow when he opened it blinded him for a moment. Inside were gold coins. He and Gabriela stared at the box for a long time and then packed up many coins, but not all.
“Let’s leave some money for the next lost children,” Gabriela said. Her brother agreed.

At sunrise the next day, they set off into the desert, picking a way that felt as if it was leading them home. That night, they rested near a large cactus, and were protected under its spiny arms.

When the sky was again orange with morning, a dove fluttered above them.

“A paloma blanca.” Gabriela smiled. The dove banked and seemed to summon them. “It is leading us home.”

They followed, and at last they saw the houses and church of their village. But much had changed. The trees were full and colored with apples and pears. Cows mooed, asking for people to milk them. Young girls gathered eggs in baskets, and women sang as they drew water from wells.

Jaime and Gabriela felt as if they could fly like the dove, which flapped its wings and sailed in the sky. They ran home. When their father saw them, he fell to his knees and kissed their faces.

“Where is Madrasta?” Jaime asked.

“She died one night in a burst of red fire,” their father replied. “The next day, the village came back to life. I believe it was she who had put the curse on the place with her hatefulness and selfishness.”

The children presented the gold to their father, telling him of Sombra and the big oven at the casa dulce.

“We never will be poor, Papi,” Gabriela said.
JAIME AND GABRIELA

But their father’s face was sorrowful. “Forgive me for being weak and not taking better care of you.”

“Papi, as long as we have each other, we will never be lost again,” Jaime said.

Then the children hugged their father as tight as they could, and he knew he had been forgiven.