

Juan slammed his tortilla down onto the wooden table in the kitchen. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his mother glance up at him and sigh, shaking her head. She knew how he was feeling. It was bad enough to be in his wheelchair on this fine day when other nine-year-old boys in *Guanajuato* were spinning and jumping their bikes on the back roads after school. Bad enough that he was trapped in this little kitchen watching his legs get thinner. He had to watch his sister Marianna run merrily out the back door to go down the street to visit Tia Carlotta and drink a hot chocolate. But the worst of it—*el peor*—was that his mother was insisting on taking him out of school to travel all the way to Brazil to some tiny *pueblito* called Abadiania. Supposedly a man there called John of God had healing powers. *Mamacita* was convinced that this Joao de Deus could make Juan's legs work once again.

“*Juanito, por favor,*” said his mother, tipping Juan's chin up so she could look directly in his eyes, which he knew were dark and flashing like the night sky just now. “Please

go arrange the things you want to take with you. We leave for Brazil in the morning!”

It was a very long trip. In the airplane there was no room to stretch his legs out. Juan felt ashamed when the attendants helped his mother arrange his limp, lifeless legs in front of his seat. All because of the stupid car accident. Why did the car have to crash into his Papa's side anyway? If it had crashed into Juan's side, his Papa would be alive now and Juan wouldn't be in this plane with his Mama, who was crying again. Juan knew how much she missed Papa, but it had been a year now. Juan was used to the lonely feeling in his stomach that made him feel hungry all the time. And he was even used to being crippled. But why did the legs have to hurt, when they couldn't even get him anywhere?

Juan made a growling sound at the attendant. He liked to pretend he was a jaguar when he was angry. The attendant stood up

quickly, startled by the growl. He hit his head hard on the overhead compartment, and walked away rubbing his head. Juan felt a giggle in the secret island inside his chest, but he tried to keep his eyes dark and cat-like so no one would catch him laughing.

Mama's eyes were glistening with tears. She was smiling now, so full of hope. "Joao de Deus will bring the spirits to work on your legs, *mi hijo*," she said, taking his hand.

Juan did his best to hide the warm feeling in his belly that began when the taxi delivered them to Abadiania. The houses and shops were painted in playful colors of ice cream and jewels, just like home. The pueblito was like a small island in the middle of emerald-colored rolling hills. And best of all, the town was flat! His Guanajuato was a hill town where even the strongest boys had to practice pedaling hard enough to make it to the top streets without walking their bikes. Those hills were almost impossible in a wheelchair.



Underneath Guanajuato lay a web of dark tunnels, where buses scurried about like rats. Juan had nightmares of being lost in those tunnels unable to find his way back to the sun. He guarded against the nightmares by wearing his own darkness on the outside, keeping his face serious and his heart as hard as the lime and melon-colored stone buildings that had been the pride of his city for centuries.

Here in Abandiania Juan began to feel nervous about becoming soft and letting down his guard. Here even the dogs trusted each other. They held their territories, but when they tried to fight they ended up playing with each other in spite of themselves.

The birds even seemed to trust people. The vultures liked to spread out their wings to show off transparent white feathers at the ends, and they slid down the air currents wingtip to wingtip, swooping in spirals as if to invite you to play with them in the sky. Other birds that Juan could never seem to spot sang scales up and down, somehow making two sounds at once that were in harmony with each other.

People here acted strangely too. They moved slowly and did not seem to care when things went a bit wrong, or they had to wait a long time in line for the healing sessions at the Casa de Dom Inacio, where Joao de Deus did his work.

People from all over the world had come to this tiny place for healing. They spoke German and English and French and other languages too. The Brazilian people spoke Portuguese, which Juan could understand sometimes. A lot of the words were the same as Spanish with mushy soft sounds, so he could usually get the general idea what was going on.

There were a few people in wheelchairs or with walkers or crutches, but most of the visitors looked perfectly fine to Juan. Mama said they might be here for healing things on the insides of their bodies, or for their feelings or to have their hearts opened to the love of God. Juan did not want his heart ripped open for anyone, and he wasn't quite sure who God was anyhow, even though his Mama talked to Deus all the time.

The first day his Mama took him to the Casa, Juan felt butterflies in his *estomago* for no reason he could think of. After all, the Casa was just a building with white walls that changed to sky blue on the lower parts, right at eye level for Juan in his wheel chair.

There were lots of pictures of Mary and Jesus and of men his mother said were the faces of men who had died a long time ago. They were now the spirits who worked with Joao to heal people. No one even seemed to think this was strange. They all acted as if heading over to the Casa was as normal as going to school.

Mama showed him the room full of wheelchairs and crutches that people had thrown away after Joao healed them and told them to walk. Juan didn't dare to hope the way he could see Mama was hoping, or to pray the way she was praying. He wished she would quit crying and take him back into town for a pistachio ice cream cone with the little candies in it. So far pistachio ice cream was the very best thing about Abadiania.



One week later, Juan and his Mama went out from their *pousada*, which is Portuguese for “posada” or inn. Mama wheeled his chair down the dirt street to the juice bar named Frutti’s, where people gathered to have tall, cool drinks in pink or melon or purple and to listen to music and sit by little white plastic tables and try to talk to each other in their different languages.

Juan knew he wasn’t hiding his gladness when Mama wheeled him right up next to Susie, a woman about her age who was in a wheelchair too. Juan knew now that people who could walk didn’t look at him with pity here. No one asked each other much about what had happened to make them want to come. It was as though everyone had the same secret wishes that they hoped the spirits and God might grant them. It was strange to Juan how those secrets seemed to make everyone the same.

Susie made Juan laugh right away, just as she always did. “There’s Little Joao!” She sparkled her big dark eyes, flashing light his way and making his cheeks burn. She teased



him because he and Joao had the same names, only in different languages. “It’s the Miracle Man! Come on, give me your healing touch!” Susie always put her hand out and made him touch her fingers with his. Then she closed her eyes and said, “I feel it ...I think I’m going to walk any minute!”

Juan couldn’t help laughing. It seemed Susie was always in a good mood, and she acted as if seeing him was the best thing that had happened to her all day. Mama said it was because she was *una luz*, a light in the sad world. She said Susie had courage to come to Abadiania and stay there by herself. She had

something called MS that caused her great pain and kept her from being able to walk. Susie did have a walker she used when she felt strong enough. Juan thought about how happy he would be if he could even get that far.

“You are always so happy!” his Mama was saying to Susie in Spanish.

Susie answered back in Spanish, using her soft Portuguese accent. “Aye, *mi hija*, it’s not true! Sometimes it is very difficult and at those times I can be *horrible!*” Juan had to believe her, because he saw tears in her eyes. But no matter what she thought, everyone else saw her as cheerful all the time, even about her problems.

“Are you better than you were when you came?” he blurted out. He hadn’t even meant to say it.

“*Mi cielo*, don’t ask Susie such personal questions,” Mama said, taking his hand.



“Oh honey, it’s okay,” Susie said, putting her hand on Juan’s arm. She said “honey” with a rich, throaty sound. “Actually, you know, I’m not.”

That was a shock, so Juan went on. “Well then, how can you be happy?”

Susie was ready with her answer. “Well, I have to look at it this way, Juanito. I’m worse now so I can be better soon. That’s all I know.”

She laughed. “And what choice do we have?” She gestured to their chairs. “This is the way it is now, so we’d better be able to laugh about it!”

More people arrived at the table now, and were pulling up chairs. It was hard to have a conversation with Susie for very long without the table filling up. She seemed to be like a magnet that pulled others to her. Juan wished he could have her to himself.

He thought about what she had said and wondered if he would ever be able to be happy and laugh about being in his chair. The conversation went on until Mama went back and let him stay alone with the group and have one of his new friends help him back to the pousada.

It didn’t take very long before Juan began pushing himself to the dining room even if Mama wasn’t hungry yet. Sometimes he would stay after the meal to listen to the

incredible stories about the miracles Joao was performing at the Casa. This very week Susie told him Joao had told two people on crutches to throw them away and walk, and they did. Juan wanted to believe her, but he had stood in the long line to see Joao twice now, for about 5 or 10 seconds each time. He had already spent hours meditating in the “current room”, sweating and wishing he could change positions in his chair or at least open his eyes. It was boring and he didn’t think anything was happening unless you count tingling in his hands, which worked anyway.

Mama said that Joao told her the same thing he had told Susie: that Juan would walk one day, but it might take a long time. Mama thought that was great news, but Juan needed something now to prove this long trip had been more than just a nice vacation.

One night Mama took Juan to Frutti’s after dinner for a cool drink. Susie was there, and the usual crowd gathered to tell stories and laugh together. Juan was enjoying himself, even

though he mostly listened. Mama was feeling tired and asked if he wanted to stay by himself. After awhile he also got tired, and told Susie he would wheel himself back to the pousada.

“Are you sure, Little Joao?” she asked. “Even with your powers, maybe you shouldn’t be out by yourself in the dark. Someone could go with you...” She started to ask around the table.

“No, no, I’d like to go myself,” Juan insisted. “It’s only a couple of blocks, and there are lights! I’m not a baby, you know...”

“No,” Susie said seriously. “You are almost a young man now...Well, you be careful. You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Juan said, turning the chair and starting down the ramp. “Ciao!”

“*Vayas con los angelitos,*” Susie called after him. “Ask the angels for protection!”

Juan didn’t need protection. All adults, even Susie, were always afraid of everything.

As Juan began to wheel his chair along the sidewalk toward the pousada, a strong wind swept in from the south, the direction of the highway and the part of town Joao’s patients were discouraged from visiting. As the wind swirled and more gusts joined it, Juan could see in his mind the dirty tunnels back in Guanajuato with their bare light bulbs against the arched stone ceilings. A shiver ran through his body, even though it was a warm night. He looked back over his shoulder. Something or someone was following him.

“Don’t be silly,” he tried telling himself. “It’s probably just one of the other customers from Frutti’s on their way home too.” But all Juan saw around him was the light from the streetlights, which now looked greenish. He needed to turn off the main street now and wheel himself down the muddy alley to the back of the pousada where their room looked out on the valley below.

The moment he turned, the gusts of wind grew stronger and louder, and the bare bulbs on the buildings showed him there were potholes in the muddy road ahead. Juan looked once more behind him, sure something was stalking him. He thought of the jaguars he had read about in the Amazon, but he knew those lived far from here, in the north part of Brazil. He shivered again and felt a sickening wave move through his stomach. "It's fear," he said to himself. "I thought I never needed to be afraid here. I thought maybe my fear had gone away, but here it is again, all around me."

Juan tried to wheel faster and his right wheel dropped into a pothole, almost flipping him over. "Take it easy," he told himself, "as if he were not terrified. *Con cuidado.*"

He had no idea how he made it back to the room. It seemed like an eternity before he knocked on the door, which his mother had locked. She opened it so quickly that Juan knew she had been standing right next to it waiting for him.

"Oh, mi cielo!" Mama was as breathless as he. "I'm so glad to see you. I don't know what it is, but this wind, the dark...I shouldn't have left you, and I was just coming to get you...Oh, you're trembling! Let's get you out of this chair!"

Hearing the same fear in his mama's voice that he felt in his own body was more than Juan could bear. As she helped him on to the edge of her bed, great sobs began to shake him like small earthquakes, and tears that had been trapped inside his body for a year began to travel up through his bones and muscles and organs, springing out of his eyes and pouring out his nose.

"Aye, *mi corazon*, what is it?" his mother gasped as she pulled him to her. "You are all right. I'll not leave you alone again. You are just a boy. Sometimes I forget..."

Juan tried to tell Mama he wasn't crying about being left alone, that he liked being more independent, that something had followed him in the dark windy night. But the words couldn't

find spaces to travel out of his mouth. The sobs took up all the space there was inside. As much as they frightened him at first, now they were feeling wonderful. He never knew it could feel good to cry. It was as though all the storms and waves on the whole earth were alive in him and had total control of his body. Even his legs twitched a couple of times as he sobbed. He saw them through his tears, but didn't even try to tell his mother about them. All he said when the wave of sobs finally stopped was, "Mama, I miss him so much."

Mama must have known, because she was crying too. "I know, *mi amor*," she said, holding him tight and stroking his hair the way she used to do when he was little. "I know. And I'm so glad you're able to feel now. That is already a healing."

"But it hurts," he answered, pointing to his heart, where a deep ache seemed to stab him. He had never felt this before.

"Si, mi cielo, it hurts," his mother sobbed. "But that hurt is the way we can feel

our love for your papa, and for each other and for our lives. So *vale la peina*; it's worth the pain."

"Maybe for you it is, Mama." Juan shocked himself with the angry tone of his voice. "You didn't cause his death!"

"What? What are you saying, Juanito? What makes you think you caused Papa's death?"

"Well, I'm alive, aren't I?" Again he shocked himself with the rude tone in his voice.

"Yes, you are alive, *mi hijo*!" His mama's voice sounded the way it did when she talked to adults. "*Gracias a Dios*! Imagine what life would be like for me if I didn't have you!"

"I can't thank God," Juan said in a rough voice. "I hate Him. He took Papa and left me here like this." He pointed to his legs. "Everyone would have been much better off if Papa had lived and I had died."

Now the tears came again, but this time instead of cradling him, Mama stiffened and said rather sternly, “It sounds to me as if you’d better have a talk with God, *Juanito*. I think you are in the middle of a misunderstanding... And here in Abadiania is the perfect place to heal that misunderstanding. After all, this is a place where miracles happen all the time. And you can relax a bit. You’re protected here.”

“O, *verdad?* Really?” Again Juan’s voice sounded rude, but Mama seemed to be ignoring that. “I didn’t feel very protected out here on the way home.” He pointed at the door. “And you seemed pretty scared yourself.”

“*Bueno*, that’s one way to look at it. But I’ve heard that the reason everything is so peaceful here is that Joao calls in protectors. It’s as though we’re on a little island surrounded by God’s love. The only opening where dark spirits could come in is above us, through a little hole above Abadiania. So Joao calls in protective spirits to keep any bad energies out.”

“Well, I think some got in tonight.”

“And you were protected, weren’t you? Something followed you, helping you home. Something let me know that you were in trouble. And here you are, safe. So let’s put you in bed and get some sleep, Juan. I think this is enough for tonight.”

As Mama tucked Juan into his own bed, he wondered who the protectors might be. Was it a good spirit or a bad one that followed him home? He was growing sleepy as Mama lit a candle and said her prayers. Before she finished, he had dropped into a deep sleep.

In the middle of the night, Juan had a dream. Once again he was out on the street, wheeling himself home from Frutti’s in the dark. Once again he was feeling scared, looking behind him to see who was following him. This time he knew that something was telling him to get home. In his dream a deep,

booming voice said, “It was the owl of Abadiania!”

In the morning his dream was still as real as if it had just happened. When his mother asked him how he had slept, Juan couldn’t help telling her what the voice had said. “What do you think it could mean?” he asked her.

“Well, do you think the voice was talking about an owl that was scaring you, or an owl that was protecting you?” she asked.

“An owl that was protecting me.” He knew right away. “But an owl? I’ve never even seen an owl. Are there owls here? How could one protect me, anyway?”

“I’ve never heard of any, mi amor, but let’s find out.” Mama helped him dress, and they went to breakfast. He saw Susie there, but didn’t want to admit to her that he had been scared, or to tell her about his strange dream.

Juan and Mama went to the Casa and sat in a the current room which was full of people sitting in chairs in front of fans with their eyes

closed, meditating. Juan was more able to relax and let his mind wander wherever it wanted. Today he felt a warm tingly feeling all over his body, even in his legs.

Afterwards he wanted some fresh air, so Mama wheeled him down a dirt road they had never explored, where they could see some other pousadas and colorful houses. As they passed by one with tall grasses in the yard, Mama suddenly stopped wheeling and whispered, “Juan, look!”

He saw it at the same time. Not ten feet in front of them stood a small owl, staring right at him. Next to it was a hole, and out of the hole popped the small head of another owl.

“Can you believe it, Juan? Look, that must be their burrow, where they live! I think they’re babies!”

Out of nowhere something flew over their heads and landed on a fence post near the burrow. It was a larger owl, and it was staring straight at them.

“That must be the parent!” whispered Mama. “Let’s stay absolutely still, so we don’t scare them.” Juan knew that. He was so amazed he couldn’t have moved if he wanted to. Another large owl flew in and landed on a second fence post. It was a family of four. Juan spotted a tiny feather that floated down to the ground, and Mama scurried to pick it up. Juan put it carefully in his shirt pocket.

They stood there a long time watching until they realized the owls were not afraid, as long as they kept their distance. Other people walked by and joined them, talking about the owls and saying they had seen them every day. They had another burrow in the field, and the adults flew back and forth, bringing food and guarding their young.

When they finally said goodbye to their feathered friends, Mama and Juan were laughing in delight. “Juanito, you had a dream



that was a sign!” she said. “There are owls here! I never would have thought it, except for your dream. Now I think we’d better find out what people believe about the owl and its powers.”

“What do you mean, its powers?” Juan asked, thinking maybe Mama meant hunting or flying.



“Animals have spirits, mi cielo, just like people. And many people believe that animal spirits protect us. I think the owl spirit must be

a protector of yours.” She seemed very happy about this, but Juan didn’t know quite what to think.

They began to ask people who lived in Abadiania about the owls. Arturo, who worked at the Casa, said an owl lived over his doorway and he thought it protected his house. Mama said that proved that owls are protectors.

But then the young man who worked in their pousada said he had heard that owls were bad luck. If one landed on your roof, he said, some people said it meant someone in the house was going to die.

“That’s just a superstition,” Mama said.

“What’s a superstition?” Juan wanted to know.

“It’s like a rumor, something people believe when they are afraid or don’t understand something. They make up a story and pass it around.”

“Well, how do we know whose story is right?” Juan said. “I don’t like the story about the owl meaning death.”

“Well, here’s Susie. Let’s ask her.”
Mama had wheeled him up to Susie’s table to have lunch. Now Juan was embarrassed. He didn’t want Susie to think he was stupid or babyish.

Susie listened to Mama’s story about Juan’s dream and seeing the owls and her eyes grew wider than ever. “I can’t believe that happened to you! You aren’t going to believe this, but when I got back last night I couldn’t sleep, and I was looking out the window to see if I could see any stars. Suddenly a bird swooped down and landed in the little tree right outside my window. It was an owl! I’ve never seen one in my whole life, Juan. Isn’t that magical that we both saw them? It has to be a good sign!” She had tears in her eyes. “Let me tell you what I think.”

Juan couldn’t believe how much Susie knew about owls. “The little owls you saw must

be burrowing owls,” she explained. “Instead of living in trees, they live in holes in the ground, often holes made by some other animal. When the young ones get old enough, they come out of the burrow like the ones you saw, and look at the world and wait for Mama and Papa to bring them some food.”

“How do you know all this?” Juan wanted to know.

“Listen, honey,” Susie waved her hand expressively. “When you’re stuck in a chair for a long time, the only way you can travel is by learning—you “walk” into the world of books, into conversations, into the Internet...” Two of her fingers made a walking motion.

“What else do you know about owls?” he wanted to know.

“Well, my parents went to Greece one time and brought me back a copy of a coin from ancient Athens. It has an owl on it, because that’s the symbol of Athena, the Goddess of wisdom. Haven’t you heard that owls are all

about wisdom? So we must both be very wise, Juanito!”

She always turned things back to him. He found himself blushing. He didn’t think he was wise at all.

As usual, others were pulling their chairs up to join the conversation. Susie, who spoke many languages, translated for a red-faced Englishman named David. “He says in English literature the owl is a sign of death.” She saw Mama’s reaction and put her hand on Juan’s arm. “But I wouldn’t worry about that. Maybe it’s just that most owls come out at night, and people think darkness is scary like death.” Susie’s face showed that she knew the conversation was getting worse, not better.

Now Isabel, an American woman with wavy hair and glasses had pulled up her chair. “Those poor owls,” she said. “They’ve had all kinds of things said about them. Some people are afraid of them, and others honor them. They’ve been linked with witchcraft and medicine, with the weather, as well as birth and

death. It just shows how powerful they are.” Susie was working hard to translate all the English.

A young Australian man named Steve chimed in. “You know in Native American philosophy owls represent wisdom and helpfulness and have powers of prophecy—or seeing into the future. Since they see so well in the darkness, they are a kind of spirit messenger, guiding us through dark places in our lives. Sometimes they are power animals, personal protectors and wise counselors.”

“You see, Juan?” Susie was looking at him directly, and pointed at him to make sure he heard the part about guiding people through dark places in their lives. “Maybe they are so mysterious because they know the night as well as the day, death as well as life. I’ve even heard that people who have died can visit their loved ones in the form of an owl.” Juan’s eyes grew wide. “But I think the important thing is for you to decide what this owl’s message was for you.

Juan had had about enough of owls at this point. He felt restless and wanted the conversation to end. He asked Mama if he could order a tall drink made of pineapple, mango and banana.

Now there were only a few days left before their stay in Abadiania would end. Juan never thought he would feel so sad about leaving a place he hadn't wanted to visit in the first place. It felt as if he had a new family here, made up of Susie, David, Isabel, Steve, and some Germans he couldn't talk to except by playing with their baby and smiling at them.

Many other people staying at the pousada waved to him when he passed, and now he waved back and sometimes stopped to talk. He had grown to love all the languages spoken at the table, and to be amazed how well people could communicate without words. His heart had grown happy here, and now the only thing that was missing was the question of whether Joao could help him walk again.



When Mama wheeled him up to see Joao at the clinic for the last time, all Joao said was, “You will walk one day, but it may take a long time. I will continue to help you, even when you go home. Most of your healing will happen through your mind and heart.” He prescribed herbs for him to keep taking when he got home, and told him to sit in meditation in the area near his chair.

Mama said that sitting near Joao was a responsibility and an honor, because Joao's work was hard. Hundreds of people lined up to

see him every day he worked in the clinic, and he needed lots of love and prayers to handle all their problems.

Juan was at the clinic early for the afternoon session, ready to sit with his eyes closed and to send love to Joao during the whole two or three hours. However long it took. After all, this was his last chance to help the man who was helping so many others. Especially the child he kept seeing in line, the girl younger than he who couldn't control her arms or legs, or even talk right. Compared to her, he felt lucky. He would remember to thank God for his life this time in the meditation.

Something strange had begun to happen in the meditation room. The voices of the people saying prayers seemed to soften his muscles. Soon he would not be asleep, exactly, but he would relax so much that pleasant dreams would come to him.

He was sure it was just his imagination, but in his mind's eye an owl flew right up to him and landed on his limp legs. It just sat there

looking at him, and he knew he was allowed to touch the soft white feathers on its belly, and to look into its golden eyes. It moved its head in a jerky, cute way, and seemed to talk to him somehow without a voice.

“I have come to show you that you can journey without using your legs. You can journey to your home. Can you see your house back in Guanajuato? Can you see the streets? Can you see your sister Marianna? How about Tia Carlotta?” Juan felt tears coming. He hadn't realized that he missed Marianna and Carlotta and Guanajuato so much.

“How about the dark tunnels?” asked the owl. Juan knew that the owl knew how much he didn't like those tunnels. “It's okay,” the owl said. “I know all about tunnels, because I live underground. You just aren't used to seeing in the dark. Come with me, and I'll show you.”

The owl took Juan on a flight through the tunnels. On the owl's back, it was exciting to fly along over the cars and under the curved roofs of Guanajuato. He could see the stone

ceilings up close and could imagine which parts of the city were above them. He realized that the tunnels were a shortcut. They were the way the buses and cars got to different parts of the city that didn't have streets big enough for cars. He didn't have to be lost there if he paid attention.

"You have been lost this last year," the owl said. "You have been in a dark tunnel inside, lost in sadness about your father and your accident." Juan started to cry, and had to remember to keep his eyes closed and try not to be embarrassed that others in the room might hear his sobs. "It's all right. It's so normal, Juan. You will always miss him. But you don't need to feel guilty that you lived. And you don't have to be miserable about not being able to walk right now."

The owl seemed to be wiping his tears away with its wings. "Your father is in a peaceful place, but he watches over you. He can see you, the way I can see in the dark. He is protecting you, as I am."

Juan wished he could see his father's face, but it had begun to fade in his memory. All he could see was a photograph in his album at home of his father playing with him.

"You are seeing him now," the owl seemed to be saying. "Through the photograph you are seeing your father, even though he is gone from the earth. You are seeing in the dark, just like me."

Juan didn't understand why this made him cry even harder, but it did. Then the owl said, "Your father wants you to know that you are fine, just the way you are."

Before he knew it, the meditation was over and everyone was told to open their eyes and drink some water that Joao had blessed and to make their way out of the room.

"How was the meditation, Juan?" his mother asked. She knew, since she had been handing him tissues while he was crying.



Juan wasn't sure how much he wanted to tell Mama. He could tell that something about the owl's visit to him was special. Just for him. So he was silent.

"I think maybe you've finally solved your misunderstanding with God," Mama said, smiling.

"God? I was just talking to my...friend, the owl."

"Hmm." Mama looked thoughtful. "A power animal, no? That's wonderful, Juan. God sends us messages in many forms."

"You mean that was God talking to me?"

"I think God has been talking to you since we got here." Mama looked very pleased. "And your father's spirit has been talking to you too." Now she looked really happy.

"But Mama, how can you be happy when nothing's changed?" Juan pointed to his legs.

"Mi cielo, everything has changed. Your eyes have light in them. You're laughing again. Just the way you sit in that chair is different."

"Really? But do you think I'll walk again?"

"I don't know, Juan." Mama looked directly at him, very serious. "But I do believe in miracles. And if we can go home with you feeling good about yourself, that is enough of a miracle for me."

“The owl said I’m all right just the way I am.” He had told Mama more than he had meant to.

“You are, mi amor. You are perfect just the way you are.”

On the last day in Abadiania, Juan told Mama he wanted to wheel his own chair down the dirt road to say goodbye to everyone at Frutti’s. He felt good about going places alone now.

Steve gave him a big hug and called him “mate,” which he said with a strange accent that sounded like “might.” Juan had learned a few words in English now, and knew that “mate” meant “buddy” or “friend” to Australians. Isabel hugged him too, and said that she was sad to see him go and that he had taught her a lot. Before he could ask her what she meant, The Germans all waved, and the baby waved too. Now he couldn’t put it off any longer. He had to say goodbye to Susie.

“Ah, I can’t say goodbye to you, Juanito,” Susie said, turning her head away. “I’m staying here so long that everyone just keeps leaving. And you—who’s going to inspire me now?”

“Me, inspire *you*?” Juan was amazed. It was the other way around. She made Juan forget he was in a chair.

“Yes, mi amor, I’ve been watching you change. You wouldn’t even look at me that first day, and now you’re talking to everyone, and going places by yourself. You have taught me that our owls were really messengers about living, not dying. I want to be fearless like Little Joao. You see, you do have powers! Now you know, don’t you?”

Juan knew he was blushing once again. He didn’t feel powerful. He just didn’t feel so alone any more. He couldn’t talk, so he just reached into his shirt pocket and took out the tiny owl feather and pressed it into Susie’s hand. She reached out for him and they hugged

with their upper bodies stretched out away from their chairs. “Now go, and just pretend I’m going to see you at lunch or I’m going to start bawling,” she said, waving him away.

Reluctantly Juan turned his chair and wheeled it away. On his right was the road to the owls’ burrow. He decided to say goodbye to them too.

It was hard to make his way all the way down the dirt road, since now the rainy season had started and there were puddles everywhere. He had always hated having mud splattered on his legs, since he couldn’t even raise them to get them out of the way. But Juan’s arms were growing stronger now, and he managed to get down the road without going through one puddle.

When he got close to the fence post where the owl parents had roosted before, he saw that they were there again. So was one of the little owls. It was standing by the burrow as before, looking straight at him. Once again a second tiny head poked in and out of the hole.

“You don’t have to be so shy,” he whispered to the little one, not wanting to frighten it. “I won’t come any closer. I just wanted to say goodbye.” The little head poked out further until he could see both eyes.

“I wish I could take you home with me,” he whispered again, feeling tears coming.

In his mind he heard the bravest baby say, “You can.” He was startled, but whispered back, “But how?”

“Just by remembering how to see in the dark,” the baby owl said, and scurried down into the burrow with its brother or sister.

Juan looked up at the parents, who were sitting on the fence posts. One was being blown by the wind that was beginning to come up. Rain would be starting before long.

“Don’t worry when things ruffle your feathers,” the owl seemed to be saying. “Don’t worry if you have to make your way through



some muddy places in your life. You are up to it. Right now. Just the way you are. It's true that you are fine, just the way you are."

"But I want to walk again," Juan told the owl. He looked up and saw the other parent on a higher post, and above it was a crescent moon.



"Be patient," it seemed to be telling him. "And never forget that miracles are possible. Anything is possible as long as you have love in your heart." Both owls spread their wide wings and took off, flying out into the field to their other burrow.

Juan turned his chair, ready to go back to the pousada and help his mother pack. Below his feet was a puddle, and he started to turn to avoid it. Then he *saw* it. This was no ordinary puddle; it was in the shape of a heart!

Juan looked for the owls, wondering if they had created this magic, but they were nowhere to be seen. He laughed out loud, put his hands squarely on the wheels, turned his chair to face the puddle and began to move forward, right towards the center of the heart.

The End.



List of Spanish words and phrases (printed in *italics* the first time they appear)

El peor: The worst

Pueblito: Little town

Mamacita: Mommy

Juanito: Johnny

Por favor : Please

Estomago: Stomach

Pousada: Portuguese for *posada* or inn

Mi hija: My sister/ my friend

Horrible: Just like English!

Mi cielo: My sky, affectionate name

Vayas con los angelitos: Go with the angels

Con cuidado: Be careful

Mi corazon: My heart, affectionate name

Mi amor: My love

Vale la peina: It's worth it; it's worth the pain

Mi hijo: My son

Gracias a Dios: Thanks be to God

Verdad?: Really? Is that the truth?

Bueno...: Well...

Note: *Abadiania* (pronounced *Abajania*) is a little town in central Brazil, where a healer called Joao de Deus or John of God works without pay, seeing hundreds of people every week in the clinic Casa Dom Ignacio. People of all faiths from all over the world travel there to experience healing that can only be explained by the heart. *Guanajuato* (pronounced *Gwanawhato*) is a city in central Mexico.