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Mexico

When she was three and he was sixty-five, she came with her parents and her sister, and they stayed the winter.

It snowed, a soft, dry snow that crunched underfoot and drifted down every day until it was more than two feet deep. Snow plows kept some of the roads open, and the plowed roads were the only practical places for walking without snow-shoes.

She took walks with her mother, who carried the baby, to the store and sometimes to the restaurant for a treat, but her father was still very ill, and most of her longer walks were with the older man.

He got up early and plunged into the work of the place. When she woke, she ate breakfast, dressed for the day, and went out to see what he was doing. He finished the task at hand, got the sled, and pulled her to the woodpile. They loaded the sled with the day's wood, and she helped him pull it back to the house and unload it. It quickly became their custom to plan a morning walk as they pulled the wood back to the house.

When he said, "Where shall we walk to today?"

She said, "Mexico."

"Ideal," he said, "We'll start for there and see how far we get."

They walked up the old road, past the cemetery road, and turned south. Dogs ran toward them and barked, and he picked her up and carried her until the dogs went back to their yard. That hundred yard carry also became their custom, even though he said, "They're friendly dogs. They won't hurt you."

The dogs became so familiar with them, they often did not come out when they walked by. Still she would say, "Carry me."

"The dogs aren't coming out."

"They might."

"Yes, I suppose they might." He picked her up and carried her to the end of the fence line. They could walk as far toward Mexico as she wanted to go, providing only that she reserved enough energy to walk all the way back, carried only past the dogs. And they had to get back in time for lunch

and a nap.

The road came out of the timber into snow-covered meadows. She asked, "Are we to Mexico now?"

"No. We would have to walk a very long way to get to Mexico. We'd have to walk clear past all the snow. Past Baker, clear past California. It would take us weeks to walk to Mexico."

She set it as a goal. One morning, they would walk clear to Mexico.

One morning, they crossed the meadows and walked into the top of a small valley. The sun came out, warm and bright, and they had to take their coats off. Sun shone nearly too brightly from the clean, white snow. She asked, "Are we to Mexico now?"

"No. We're farther than we've ever gone, but we're not to Mexico yet. And we must turn back, or we'll be late for lunch and your nap, and you'll want me to carry you, and I won't."

"Except past the dogs."

"Yes, except past the dogs."

When she was eighteen, she wrote him, "The student tour was very reasonably priced. I went for two weeks, and Mexico is everything we always knew it would be, sunny, very warm, and the people there are warm and hospitable. If we had walked clear to Mexico, the first people we met would have invited us in to visit and dine with them."

Alone his last years in the mountains, he thought often of Mexico. "Parts of Mexico are very like this country," he said as he hiked up the ridge in the hot summer sun.

"Nothing in Mexico like this," he said as he shoveled snow from his front steps. But he wasn't grumbling. He liked the snow, always had.

Late summer, he hiked up Buckthorn ridge to look down over the valley. He sat down and leaned against a rock. His vision blurred, and he had great difficulty moving any of his muscles. His senses seemed to retract, to let go of most contact with the outer world.

He prepared himself to die, but he did not die. By late afternoon, he was able to marshall his senses and forces enough to make his way back down the ridge and find help.

He felt a bitter edge of resentment that he had been physically impaired but given the force, the responsibility to continue living. He had always taken care of himself, but now he couldn't control his movements enough

to do it. A stroke, they said, with permanent physical impairment. He wouldn't take most of the treatment they offered, and he felt some anger that he was totally dependent.

She came to see him, late in the fall. She said, "Maybe that's why you didn't die when you thought you would. You've always helped people very generously, with no motive except the fulfillment of need. Maybe you need to accept help from a very dependent position before your experience is broad enough to pass from this physical plane."

"Well, I don't like it, and it isn't broadening. I don't know these people. A hospital is a place where you get sicker because everyone thinks of you as a sick person, and eventually you start agreeing."

"The hospital you don't need to accept, and concepts of illness you don't need to accept. You need to go home, with help at home."

She made the arrangements, took him home, and tended his needs, but not too much. She reinforced his attitude that he was not ill and could handle many of his own needs.

The first snow came, a soft dry snow that crunched underfoot. He came out and helped her pull the sled load of wood to the house. "You see," he said, "they were wrong when they said permanent impairment. I continue to regain strength and control."

He watched her unload wood onto the porch. "And I have learned to accept help, and it is broadening. I'm grateful you could be here."

They began to take walks every morning. "To Mexico," he said. They went up the old road, past the cemetery, and turned south. He reserved enough energy to walk back, but each morning they went farther.

On their last walk, they started out in a light, very dry snowfall. They first stood on the porch for quite some time, so the outer surface of their clothing would be cold and not melt the snow to wet them.

Large, intricately patterned snow flakes floated slowly down and accumulated on her hair, on their clothing, as they passed the cemetery road and turned south. He said, "This morning I feel so fine, I think I really could walk clear to Mexico."

They walked down the road through the meadows and into the lower timber. His perception of the landscape changed so easily, he didn't think of it as unusual.

Though she saw the snow falling a little faster, the mountains east of

them indistinctly grey through a mile of falling snow, he saw clear blue sky, sunshine, lush grass in the sun, a wheat crop maturing yellow white. Warm breeze blew through his hair.

He turned and saw the snow in her hair and smiled at her. She saw the last trace of paralysis in his facial muscles had gone. His face glowed as if in sunshine. Joyful wonder began deep in his eyes.

He turned around and looked about him and began to walk on down the road, "Mexico. My dear sweet Lord, it's Mexico."

He passed quickly from this plane of existence. His body rested easily in the snow.

She walked back, got the sled, and pulled him back to the house. The road was nearly level; the sled was not hard to pull. She walked an easy pace.

"You know," she said into the now heavily falling snow, "that's what I'm going to do when I finish everything here. Go to Mexico. Get on a train and go all the way to Mexico."