

The Wrong Mischief

by Nancy Martz

The small boy Emelio rounded the adobe house, carrying the ladder made of Juniper branches tied together, knowing it would hold his slight weight. He laid it quietly to the tan wall, wanting to avoid stirring curiosity from inside the house. His mother had warned him to keep off the roof, but it was just too tempting, and besides, he had a greater secret up there. As Emelio eased himself up and climbed atop, his left foot bumped the ladder kicking it sideways; he froze, but the ladder fell soundless onto the pale yellow chamesa bush and stayed.

Crawling quietly over the brown roof tiles, and sighing with relief, he spotted his small stone he had carefully placed by a certain tile and squatted by it, staring out to the sky's end, lost in the beautiful, lonely vastness. His gaze drifted from the trace snow atop Truchas Peak, and the distance splintered, sun-caught, into the ridges of Sangre de Cristo mountain range, rising and falling under a million firs, pines, junipers and pinions. Wistful in these last savored days before school started again, Emelio wished the freedom of summer to last forever. He watched the only cloud seeming inches from the sun. No rain today for the snakeweed scrubbing the mesas, nor for the family's vegetable field behind the house. The cloud blistered out of sight before he could see some animal form in it.

He fingered under the marked tile for the plastic wrap and unfolded his stash of cigarette butts. Hunkering down he struck a kitchen match to light one, pulling acrid smoke into his mouth; the taste was brutal, and he wanted to yell "Eeyuck!" and spit, but he emboldened himself to take a little into his lungs without choking and vomiting. That was one of the prices of manhood, Emelio believed. Recovering, he frowned grandly, practicing the look he had seen his father wear against the sun.

Then worrying about being found out, he pinched the lit end, rewrapping and fixing the butts under the tile. Whenever his yearning to break the subordination of little boy life recurred, he would return to the roof, where he could fantasize leaving Truchas behind for big city life in Santa Fe. He didn't understand yet that visitors the world over were passing his mountain village with envy for that million dollar view and freedom from pollution and urban sprawl.

Suddenly he heard a voice and panicked; he scrambled over the tiles and eased himself to the lowest part of the roof and looked below for a landing, but pinion was stacked under the window. Still, he had no time to lose, and he hooked the projecting viga letting his thin legs drop, bony shoulders and hips hunching at the raw shock of scattering firewood scraping his bare feet. His head jerked, his alert eyes instinctively scrutinizing the window above the row of coffee cans sprouting herbs, peppers and flowers. The noise would bring his mother there, but she might think a stray dog had done it.

Running free, he glanced back, chest fluttering, swallowing a flurry of giggles. He hid inside the shed, listening. The young donkey Mateo brayed softly in his stall. "Mateo!" he whispered, "Don't give me away!" Often he rode on Mateo while his father used the donkey to pull the plow against the rocky vegetable field. One day, all grown up, Emelio would use a tractor, and Mateo would long be a beloved pet for Emelio's own sons on these beloved acres.

His mother's voice lifted in annoyance: "Emelio! Come here!" The dry volley of wood on wood interrupted her mutterings, and the boy hurriedly chewed some Juicy Fruit gum and rubbed his hands against Mateo before heading to the house to help her repair the wrong mischief.