



BY RANDALL STOKES

# In Mexico

## The sun had barely cleared the low, distant hills,

but it was already too hot to sleep any longer. Jake sat on the edge of the old canvas army cot he'd set up the night before next to Ben's old blue school bus, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He had hoped it would be cooler sleeping outside under the night sky, but the heat had been bad through the night, too, so he hadn't slept well.

He had not expected it to be this hot, not in late November, not Thanksgiving day. He had come with Ben and Tricia last year for the long Thanksgiving weekend, and it had been cool and pleasant, with moist, salty breezes blowing in gently from the Gulf of California. They had worn sweaters in the evenings and warmed themselves around a campfire of pine logs and driftwood. They had drunk lots of Mexican beer and cheap Kahlua, and had eaten fresh fish rolled in a batter of milk and crushed crackers and fried over the open flames. During the days they had wandered down the beach to the nearby fishing village to replenish their supply of fish and beer, and to buy the pink and green cookies from the *panaderia*, even though the cookies had almost no flavor. It had been a peaceful, relaxing four days, and Jake had been able to forget, briefly, that a few hours north across the border families had been gathering to celebrate Thanksgiving.

Jake had been looking forward to this trip for weeks, remembering what it had been like last year, and planning for the same this year. He had stuffed a couple of his oldest, softest sweaters and a pair of faded blue sweatpants in a nylon duffle bag. He had gone to a nearby firewood lot and filled the trunk of his old Volvo with enough small logs of dry split pine for several nights' campfires. But he hadn't expected this heat. He had also not expected Max would come along on this trip.

Wednesday morning, only hours before Ben and Tricia were to pick him up in their old school bus, Jake's phone had rung, waking him. Jake figured it would be Ben, checking some small detail, who was bringing crackers for the fish batter, or something like that.

It was Marie. She still knew Jake too well. She knew he stayed

up late most nights, and that by calling him now she would likely catch him groggy with sleep, so he couldn't mount an argument or form an excuse.

"Jake," she started in a rush, "I'm in Phoenix, at Anne's. I'm bringing Max over so he can spend Thanksgiving with his father. I'll be there in an hour." She told Jake, words spilling out to prevent any response, that she and Keith, Jake's successor, had gained admission at the last minute to some exclusive hideaway resort somewhere in Northern California for the Thanksgiving weekend. Children were not allowed.

"But, Marie," Jake had finally squeezed in hoarsely, "I have plans, too. Can't he stay with Anne?" Anne was Marie's sister.

"He's your son, for God's sake. We'll be there in an hour. Less."

By the time the knock came 40 minutes later, Jake had managed to wash his face, pull on some clothes and make coffee. He opened the door, bracing himself for Marie. Instead, Anne stood there wearing her sunniest smile. Beside her was Max, wearing a purple Lakers cap, a bright red T-shirt with "Billabong" scrawled across the chest, and navy blue pants covered with pockets. Everything seemed several sizes too big, Jake had thought, but maybe that was the style now. Jake didn't really know much about 10-year-old boys.

"Hey, Max," Jake had said as the boy brushed past him wordlessly, a red and black backpack looped over one shoulder.

"Jake," Anne said, still standing by the door. "Marie was running late and had to get back to the airport, so she asked me to bring Max," Anne apologized weakly for her sister. "I've got to go, but Marie left me a number where I can reach her in an emergency." Anne read the look on Jake's face, and continued, dropping her eyes to avoid Jake's gaze. "She told me not to give it to you, but just to have you call me if you need to."

"Okay. Thanks," Jake mumbled. It was his turn now to stare at the ground.

"I'll be in Flagstaff, Jake, but I'll have my phone with me if you

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need me. Call if you need me, okay? Okay?” She dipped her head slightly, trying now to catch Jake’s eye, to renew the tenuous alliance the two of them had formed in the five years since her sister had left him. Jake looked up at her and said, with a wan smile, “Thanks, Anne.” She turned to the boy and said, “Bye, Max.” She got no more response from Max that Jake had. With a tentative wave, she turned and left.

Jake turned to face his son. Max had sprawled across the worn plaid sofa and seemed to be studying the cobwebs in the corner near the ceiling. Jake noticed for the first time that Max was wearing silver plastic headphones, with a band that wrapped low around the back of his neck. Maybe they did that, Jake thought, to keep the band from resting on the button on top of the cap. He reached over and lifted one side of the headphones away from Max’s ear.

“Are you hungry?”

Max answered with a glare and a fierce shake of his head. He resettled the headphones on his ears, and returned his stare to the ceiling.

Jake retreated to the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee and took a deep breath. Before Max and Anne had arrived, he had called Ben and Tricia. No one had answered—they were probably out getting last-minute supplies, Jake decided—but he had told their answering machine Max would be joining them on their trip. “If that’s okay,” he added quickly, then hung up for fear they were there and would pick up the phone. Ben and Tricia were post-divorce friends, and didn’t know Max. For that



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matter, Jake mused, he didn't know Max very well either.

Jake went back to the living room. Max hadn't moved. Jake knelt in front of Max and moved his cupped hands outward away from his ears, a mime's request that the boy remove his headphones. Max reluctantly complied.

"Max, we're going to drive down to Mexico with some friends of mine for the long weekend. They'll be here in an hour or so. They have this great old school bus someone painted bright blue and fitted out like an RV. It's got beds, a little stove and the smallest refrigerator you've ever seen."

"Does it have a TV?" Max asked, breaking his silence.

"No," Jake replied, surprised by the question. "Ben added a cassette player, and we'll probably listen to it on the way down. But no TV." Jake thought for a moment, and made a decision he regretted as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "And you have to leave your CD player and headphones, and any other electronics, here. That way we can talk, catch up."

Max stared open-mouthed at Jake, his eyes flaring. He looked, Jake thought, as if Jake had just shot the boy's favorite pet while he watched. For a moment, Jake wondered if Max even *had* a pet, and decided he probably didn't; Marie had always hated animals, and never let Jake have a pet. Finally, just as Jake was ready to relent, Max spoke. "You can't do that. It's not fair. You're an asshole, just like Keith."

Jake knew that he should chastise Max for that. He knew a parent couldn't let his 10-year-old son use that kind of language. But the moment passed while Jake reflected on the fact that Max thought Keith was an asshole, too. Max escaped further punishment, but Jake let the electronics ban stand.

Max stomped off to the bathroom. Jake went to his bedroom and retrieved his duffle bag and set it by the front door. In the kitchen, he finished loading ice, canned soft drinks and a few bottles of beer into his small plastic cooler, and sipped a little more coffee. Just as he was debating whether to add a little bourbon to his cup to lighten his mood, he heard the familiar two-tone, high-low notes of Ben's horn. He hurried to open the door and waved at Ben and Tricia, while calling to Max, "Hey, Max, they're here. Let's go!"

Jake left the door open, carried the cooler and duffle bag out and put them on the bus. Max followed behind, shouldering his backpack. Jake pointed to the door of the bus, and Max climbed in. Jake saw through the open windows of the bus that Max had found his way to a seat in the back. Jake, Ben and Tricia transferred cardboard boxes of the split-pine firewood from the trunk of Jake's Volvo to the bus. "You got my message?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Yeah," Ben said, as he and Tricia climbed the steps into the bus. "No problem. We'll have fun with Max."

Jake wasn't so sure, but he climbed aboard anyway. He moved to the back, across the aisle from Max. Ben shouted "All aboard!"

like a railroad conductor, put the bus in gear, and they were off.

It was a long drive, longer than Jake remembered from the year before. The heat grew noticeably as they got farther south. Jake tried several times to start a conversation with Max, but Max resisted the attempts and stared stubbornly out the window. Jake didn't try too hard anyway. The bus wasn't air conditioned, so they had opened all the windows to catch some air. The roar of the wind in all those windows, together with the rattling noise of the old bus itself, made conversation impossible, a shouting match at best.

Jake stared out the window opposite Max. Jake enjoyed the view as they got farther south, away from the cities and into the desert. He thought of all the people who came to Arizona for the first time, expecting to see rolling dunes of nearly white sand stretching to the horizon, a *Lawrence of Arabia* landscape. Instead, they saw a wilderness filled with low vegetation, sheltering a wide array of wildlife, with distant mountains swathed in haze. Jake especially enjoyed the plants: tall, stately saguaro lifting their dusty green arms to the sky in mute supplication; ocotillo sprouting thin, spiny branches, tipped with surprising red flowers a dozen feet in the air; unnamed bushes clinging tenuously to the dry, dusty soil, waiting for a gust of wind or the pull of a passing eighteen-wheeler to turn them tumbling across the road, startling passing motorists. Jake watched as they passed through this landscape on the rolling two-lane highway pointed at the border. He thought he would have to try again to write about this scene. He'd tried before, but the words hadn't come out right. The writing hadn't been going well at all lately, but maybe something would come out of this trip to get it flowing again.

Writing had, in a way, gotten him to where he was now. Jake had been a lawyer but had grown tired of the work. He had looked around him at other, older lawyers, who hated their work, but who seemed to feel trapped by it, or by the money or prestige it brought them. Jake had fiddled around some, in his spare time, with writing—poetry, occasional short stories, opinion pieces in the local papers—and friends praised his work and encouraged him to do more.

Jake thought about it for a long time and tried to discuss it with Marie. Yet when he told Marie he had decided to quit his job and write—just write—Marie had reacted with shock and anger, then hesitated only briefly before taking Max and moving to California. Divorce followed quickly, and Jake had suspected that, after all, Marie had just been waiting for an excuse to leave. But certainly, after Jake quit his job, there had been insufficient income to support the life Marie had come to enjoy.

So here he was, riding south into Mexico on an old, rattling school bus with a son he hardly knew and who seemed to hate him. Jake didn't understand, so he just stared out the window.

By the time they pulled into the small campground by the Gulf, daylight was almost gone, though the heat was still stifling. They



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all climbed down from the bus, stretched cramped limbs and looked around, surveying their surroundings like shipwrecked mariners cast up on a foreign shore. There wasn't much for them to do to get set up for the night. Ben walked over to the small office to check in and buy a couple bags of ice, Tricia pulled out four aluminum folding chairs covered in festively colored nylon webbing, and Jake wrestled the coolers out into the shade next to the bus. Max stood apart, staring out to the Gulf, which was just visible beneath the rapidly darkening sky. Jake glanced over at Max; this is going to be a miserable weekend, he thought then, especially if this heat doesn't break.

No one felt like building a campfire or eating much. Max pulled a Coke out of a cooler and sat in one of the folding chairs to drink it. The others drank beer and listlessly passed around a bag of pretzels. No one spoke for a long time. Finally, Ben stood and said, "I'm going to bed and hope I wake up tomorrow to a cooler day." Tricia stood, too, and headed into the bus with Ben. They had a double bed bolted into the rear of the old bus, replacing the back rows of seats and hidden behind a curtain of rough muslin hung on rings from the bus's ceiling. Jake led Max in to one of the other, smaller bunks in the bus's midsection; without a word, Max pulled off his shoes and rolled into the bunk, facing away from Jake. Jake stood for a moment, then went outside, climbed up the rickety metal ladder on the back of the bus and hauled down from the rack on its roof one of the old cots Ben kept there for anyone who wanted to sleep outdoors. Jake unfolded the cot, grabbed another beer from the cooler, and laid down to wait out the night and the heat.

Thanksgiving morning the heat woke Jake, though he'd only slept fitfully through the night. He pulled on his shorts, shrugged into a faded T-shirt and slipped his feet into a pair of worn canvas deck shoes. He had looked forward for weeks to a breakfast of eggs and bacon cooked over the campfire, but it was too hot to cook. Instead, he grabbed a Coke from one of the coolers—coffee was out of the question in this heat—and walked down to the beach. The tide was far out, as if the water of the Gulf were trying to escape the heat of the land. As Jake stepped over the low sea wall onto the sand, he felt the heat radiate up through the rubber soles of his shoes. He started to walk out toward the retreating tide, then decided it wasn't worth the effort and turned back to sit on the wall and look at the water. He sat there in the heat, sipping his Coke, trying to make it last. After an hour or so, he got up and headed back to the bus.

He got back to find Max there, awake, sipping from a plastic bottle of orange juice and wearing the same clothes he'd worn on the trip down the day before. Without looking directly at Jake, Max offered, "That guy was snoring too loud, so I got up and came outside to find something to eat." Jake nodded, went into the bus, and came back out with a cardboard box stuffed with granola bars, bags of chips and other snacks. "It's too hot to cook anything now," Jake said. Jake and Max dug around in the box

and came out with a few chewy granola bars for their breakfast. They sat side by side and stared toward the Gulf, eating quietly, conserving energy to battle the heat.

There was still no sign of Ben or Tricia by the time Jake and Max had finished eating. Jake climbed into the bus and came back out with an empty gray nylon backpack and said, "Come on, Max. Let's go to town and get some fish." Max groaned, but didn't offer any further objection. He stood, and the two, father and son, set off up the dusty road toward the small village.

By the time they reached the village, just a short walk down the road, the heat had grown noticeably worse, desperate and oppressive. It was as if that year's summer angrily refused to be displaced by autumn and stayed on to punish the poor townspeople for dreaming of cooler days.

It was quiet in town. It was quiet even in the usually bustling fish market, where the fishermen came to unload their catch from small, greasy boats reeking of fish and diesel fuel, to be sold from tiny stalls stuffed side by side along the creaking, crumbling docks. It was more stifling here, where the heat coaxed the smells of long-dead fish from the worn wood-plank sidewalks bordering the stalls. Most of the stalls were empty, and the few that were inhabited didn't seem to have any inventory to offer. The old men and women who ran them sat there, on stools or upended crates, out of habit, or because they had no place else to be.

Jake and Max stopped at a couple of the stalls to see if there was any fish, but the proprietors just sat and smiled, shaking their heads. They looked to the docks, where the fishing boats crowded in, bobbing gently, tethered to pilings under the high sun, which seemed to have bleached the sky nearly white. No fishing today. Jake and Max walked on.

The tiny market across from the stalls, where Jake had hoped to buy Kahlua, was closed, its door and windows barred, secured by rusty padlocks that might have been salvaged from a 19th-century jailhouse. It seemed the heat had closed down the entire town.

They rounded the corner, past the market, and saw it. In the dusty street up ahead stood an elephant, gray and ghostly, even in the searing sunlight. Small children flitted around it like mosquitoes in the heat, poking it with sticks, pelting it with stones. As Jake and Max grew nearer, they could see it was a smaller elephant, though certainly an adult. It was a female, with each leg bound around the ankle by a heavy metal band attached to links of chain that looked so heavy it would take several men to move them. The chains, in turn, were welded to iron bars driven deep into the dirt street. These precautions seemed excessive, though, because the elephant looked too old and listless to make any attempt to escape. On closer inspection, Jake saw its skin hung loosely, in large draping folds, like that of an old, once-fat man who had recently lost a lot of weight as a result of a wasting illness. She had a cloudy gray cast in one eye and seemed to be blind on that side. She had sores on her legs and belly, and flies swarmed them. Her head hung

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heavily, and her trunk rested on the ground in front of her. She seemed not to notice the children tormenting her.

Max stopped dead in the street, staring with his mouth open, horrified. "Dad," he cried to Jake. "What are they doing? Why do they hate that poor elephant?"

Jake stopped, then, too, turning back to Max. Jake looked carefully at his son's stricken expression. He thought a moment and then said, "I don't think they hate the elephant, Max. I think maybe —" Here, Jake paused to take a breath and collect his thoughts before continuing, "maybe they're just frustrated by what seems like a miserable life, and they try to escape it for a little while by mistreating someone who looks helpless to them."

As Max continued to stare angrily at the children dancing around the elephant, Jake turned and walked over to an old man who sat, watching, on a small stool a few feet from the iron stake to which the elephant's left foreleg was chained.

"Hey!" Jake said loudly. "Are you in charge here? Why are you letting these children do this?"

The old man peered out under the wide brim of a greasy straw hat with holes worn in its crown, and shook his heavy head at Jake. "No matter," he said slowly, in heavily accented English. "She dying anyway. Circus leave her here. To die."

Jake heard a loud yell and turned in its direction. Max had picked up a stick and was waving it at the other children. "No! Get away!" he shouted, brandishing the stick. "Leave her alone!" The children, stunned at being challenged, dropped their sticks and rocks, and backed away a couple of yards. Jake watched in wonder as his son walked slowly, tentatively, toward the elephant and gently began stroking her trunk with his small hand. He could hear Max murmuring softly to her, though he couldn't make out the words. They all stood there like that for many minutes; the only movement was Max's hand tenderly caressing the elephant's rough trunk.

Just as Jake was about to call Max to go, the elephant slowly lifted her head and raised her trunk, coiling it lazily in the hot air above Max's head, and with a flick sent Max's baseball cap flying off his head into the dirt. Jake's stomach sank in panic, afraid of what seemed to be happening, and started to lunge forward to grab Max. But then the elephant lowered her trunk and, with a gentleness that seemed impossible for such a large creature, began

nuzzling Max's short blond hair with the tip of her trunk. Then, with a moist, soft sigh, she again lowered her trunk to the ground. With one last pat on the elephant's trunk, Max turned, retrieved his cap from the dust, and rejoined Jake, tears forming rivers in the dirt on his cheeks.

"Can we go, now, Dad?" he managed to say.

"Sure," Jake answered, feeling tears filling his own eyes. And father and son walked together back toward the campground. Max carried his cap in his hand, while Jake gently stroked Max's head, in unconscious mimicry of the elephant's caress.

Neither spoke until they were back at the campground. They could see Ben and Tricia down at the

beach, just beyond the sea wall, looking in the sand for something. Finally, Max spoke.

"Dad, do you remember telling me stories when I was little?"

"Yeah, Max, I remember. But I'm surprised you do. That was a long time ago, and you couldn't have been more than four or five years old."

"I remember. I used to love your stories, Dad. Is that what you're writing now? The kind of stories you told me when I was little?"

"No," Jake said. "I can't seem to write stories like that now. I sit down at the computer and try to write them, but they all come out wrong. No one wants to read the stories I write now."

"The elephant reminded me of the stories you used to tell me, Dad. They were good stories, about people and animals. They didn't always have happy endings, but I always cared about what happened. Even after the stories were over, I remembered them, and *cared* about what would happen to everyone. You should write stories like that now."

"Those were fun stories to tell, Max. I cared about what happened to the characters, too. I always wanted things to come out right, though sometimes the endings weren't happy. Back then, it was easy to tell you those stories, but now it's hard for me to write them. The words don't come."

"Then just tell the stories to me. Don't worry about writing them down. Maybe the words will just come like they used to."

And that night the intense heat finally broke. Cool breezes blew in from the Gulf and the tide ended its retreat. Jake took Max down to the beach and there, beneath the stars, told one story after another, until finally, deep into the night, Max drifted off to sleep in his father's arms. 