



The night of his brother's wedding, she came to him in a dream. Although the details were lost in a misty fog, her dark brown eyes and jet black hair haunted him in the days which followed. He was twenty-six, a bit long in the tooth for a man to still be a bachelor in the 1920s. Hell, all his primos and compadres had been married for years, and he didn't even have a single prospect in sight. So when the dark-eyed beauty came into his dreams night after night, he became obsessed with finding her.

In my debut novel, this is how I introduced my father's preoccupation with finding the woman who captured his heart after only one meeting. I regret not asking my mother for more details, but I used the one fact she did disclose—that they met at a dance—and elaborated it into the love story my imagination supplied.

My father, José Valdez, lived in a small rural community, and following in his father's footsteps, he became a farmer and rancher, working the farm and caring for the livestock with his brother. The rural communities back then were governed by societies of men known as los Hermanos de la Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno. José's father was Hermano Mayor of his *cofradía* and so inducted him into the society when he turned fifteen. Taking his responsibilities of being an Hermano as well as a land owner to heart, José filled his days with labor and commitment to his community. Content with life and convinced he would remain a bachelor, he didn't give much thought to marriage until the night of his brother's wedding and the dreams started.

I tried to portray José as the devout Hermano and hard-working man he truly was. But to incorporate how he knew my mother was the girl of his dreams, I gave him an attribute I created: a bit of "the sight" he inherited from his own mother, who was a true *life médica*, the closest thing to a doctor the community had. With the suspicion that the raven-haired girl was somewhere near, he began to attend every dance and every feast day celebration for miles around. I called upon my own memories of the foods we prepared for religious feasts: chiles

verdes y colorados, posole y menudo, and frijolitos pintos eaten with cucharitas made from small pieces of tortillas. I used real New Mexico locations to show how José went to Las Vegas, twenty miles to the south, then to Mora, twenty miles to the north, and every little village and hamlet in between over the next few months. His eyes searched every location for the dream girl to no avail, and his heart began to lose hope that he would ever find her.

There were several places where I described the dance halls and the wedding celebrations common to Hispanics everywhere as José made one last attempt to find the girl. He headed to yet one more wedding dance where his cousin waved him over to a large table full of people when he arrived. Introduced to first one couple, then another, several giggling young females, and another bachelor, José almost fainted right there when his eyes locked with the same eyes he saw in his nightly dreams. His heart pumped so loudly in his chest he was sure she could see each beat, and his knees shook so much he was afraid he was having a heart attack on the spot. After the initial shock and several gulps of moonshine to bolster his courage, he engaged her in conversation and as they say, the rest is history. They found mutual interests, they danced almost every dance, and they began to fall in love right then.

Their family tracts of land were only about five miles apart, yet separated by mountains and valleys, lush meadows, and dry creek beds that overflowed with the spring crecientes, run offs. In keeping with tradition, he knew her parents wouldn't allow him to come calling out of the blue. So because of this, he wrote a letter to her father for permission to court her in letters. Señor Montoya agreed, and for a period of a few months their letters enabled them to get to know one another. Finally, José asked his parents to write one final, all-important letter, this time to her father once more.

Because I used historical documents my mother collected over the years, I incorporated a few of them in my story. This is the letter José's parents penned to María del Carmen's parents.

Canoñcito de las Manuelitas, Nuevo Mexico Noviembre 27, de este año 1929^[1]
Señor y Señora Nazario Montoya^[2] Las Cañadas, Nuevo Mexico,
Respetables Señores:^[3]

Queremos decirles que nuestro hijo, José Valdez, nos ha anunciado su deseo de entrar de matrimonio con su amable y hermosa hija, Esperanza Montoya. El esta listo para hacerla una vida comfortable y alegre. Tiene un gran amor para su hija, y tiene propiedad, vacas y dinero para darle una vida buena. Por estas razones, José desea extender su mano para jurarla amor para siempre en el sagrado sacramento de matrimonio. Como padres que aman a su hijo mucho, decidimos cumplir con este acto sagrado para que nuestro hijo y su hija puedan comenzar su vida juntos si ustedes son agradable con este proposito. Esperamos recibir contesta favorable.

Con alto respecto,^[4]
Señor y Señora Aniceto Valdez

I also incorporated the translation in the context through Jose's narration: his parents want to tell hers that he announced his desire to enter marriage with the congenial and beautiful Maria del Carmen Montoya. They explained he is ready to give her a comfortable and happy life. He has a great love for their daughter, and he has property, cattle, and money to give her a good life. For these reasons, he desires to extend his hand in marriage to their daughter whom he professes to love forever. Like parents who very much love their son, his parents decide to complete this sacred act so that their son and the Montoya's daughter can begin their lives together if her parents are agreeable to this proposal. They will await their favorable reply with much respect. About a week later—a week in which José worked himself to exhaustion to keep his mind occupied and to sleep without dreams (it didn't work, by the way)—the Montoya family arrived at his home to deliver their reply in person. Here I included only the body of the letter and translated only one important sentence, the one which mattered most to José.

En respuesta a su carta de fecha de Noviembre 27, 1929, en la cual nos demuestraron que su honorable hijo, José Valdez, desea entrar al estado de matrimonio con nuestra hija, Esperanza Montoya, permitanos decirle que después de haber consultado con ella, ella nos ha dicho que es favorable con ^[SEP]el idea de matrimonio con su hijo y que acepta su propósito de matrimonio... The gist of the response is that after having consulted with their daughter, María del Carmen's parents discovered that the idea of marriage to José is favorable and that she accepts his proposal.

As the only child of parents who met once before they married in 1938, I wanted my book to be a tribute to them. I wanted to portray how their love became strong through adversity—surviving the Great Depression, contributing to the war effort, making a life on the ranch and later in the city, and overcoming the loss of three infant daughters fourteen years before I was born. Their love story intertwined with their faith. He became the leader as Hermano Mayor of our little valley's cofradía of Hermanos and she became a Veronica, his loyal helpmate.