

"In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart."

DIARY OF ANNE FRANK.

CHAPTER ONE

A

SICKLE

moon hung in
the turquoise sky, like
a clipping from God's fingernail.

A thousand stars winked down on the slumbering San Miguel Valley where the Texas doves cooed from the rocky nooks of Panocha Ridge. The ridge was a steep, rocky hill with a prominent forehead and a crew-cut top. Many seeds for valley children had been conceived on top of Panocha Ridge in the back seats of Chevies, Fords and even a few John Deere tractors.

The Texas doves, invaders from the south, were as amorous as the natives, multiplying in the biblical sense, but having, as Padre Gomez once said, more morals than his Sunday flock in church since they picked a mate for life. Texas was always the big brother to Colorado. Texas was bigger in land, money, hats and ego.

And the native Colorado turtledove, whose tiny pink breasts were usually tossed into succulent red chili sauces for Polenta dishes in the valley, were shy of their new kin who sported big plump breasts and cooed lavish and lusty songs. The impressive songsters also wore plumes on top of their heads, like ancient Roman helmets.

But the most troubling attribute of the Texas dove was a set of powerful lungs, which the people admired in the early stages of the migration. The citizens of San Miguel were inspired to see these big birds on the tree tops in the dusk of the evening until the "little cabrones" started to arouse the citizens out of their

warm beds at 5 a.m. with incessant love songs. And when they didn't fly back South for the winter, like reasonable birds, Pachuco Pacheco blasted two of the crooners into the happy hunting grounds with a double-barrel Remington shotgun. And like any persecuted refugees in a new land, the Texas doves made a beeline for the heights of safety on the rocky Panocha Ridge.

So it was no strange thing when a Texas dove alighted onto the hood of Jerry Agee's pickup truck parked on top of Panocha Ridge and cooed for his mate in the cliffs below.

Jerry Agee lifted his big head out of Sarah Ortega's bosom, the daughter of the local Sheriff, and noticed the bird on the hood. He pounded his hand on the horn and tooted to no avail. The Texas Dove was perched as solid as the Chevy hood ornament. Jerry went back to the heaving bosom.

"Let's do it," he said in a husky voice. "I love you."

"I have no ring, hijo," said Sarah, "so get a clue."

"Please give me some panocha, honey," pleaded Jerry. "I love my Mexican candy!"

"Cochino," said Sarah. She was a dark, lovely girl with murky Spanish eyes and long black hair.

The pickup truck rocked from the wrestling match, and the Texas dove remained stubbornly on the hood. Suddenly the sky exploded into a dazzling show of mischievous lights, soaring and arcing across the Colorado heavens.

A pair of lights traveled a great distance, as if carried by wings, and then hovered directly over the pickup truck on Panocha Ridge. The lights slowly circled the truck in bright, pulsating bursts of red and orange. Jerry's head popped up like a puppet. He wiped the love fog off the rearview mirror.

"Is that your daddy?" he asked. "I see red lights flashin'!"

His moon face was as pale as a pearl, and his flaming red hair matched his freckles. Sarah lay on the seat, brown and languid as a cat.

"Come here, my Howdy Doody," she said.

Inside the truck, the Hula girl in a grass skirt on the dashboard started to shake her hips. The radio clicked on,

surfing channels until it stopped on the languid guitars of a Mexican love song.

"Turn off the radio," said Sarah.

"I didn't turn it on."

"Who did?"

He looked out the foggy windshield. The Texas dove was bathed in eerie light, one eye looking upward, head cocked and cooing incessantly. The bird attempted to take flight, but his wings froze in mid-air, and the dove was splattered against the windshield like a giant, bloody bug. A beak, tiny bones and feathers fluttered into the air. Jerry turned on the windshield wipers and managed to smear the bloody mess. Then the truck's engine mysteriously cranked to life and some unseen force gunned the engine. The truck slowly levitated up into the air, turned spookily in a full turn, and plunged back to earth in a thud of dust. Jerry's head hit the roof and he bit his tongue.

"Shit!" he said.

"Jerry?"

Jerry gunned the truck in his panic, but the gear was in neutral.

"Where is my sneaker?"

They exited the truck and Sarah hobbled over sharp stones to the edge of Panocha Ridge. They were blinded by the pulsating orange and blue lights of two flying saucers, resembling the planet of Saturn.

"They look just like the ones in comic books," he said. "Look at the rings."

Sarah's jaw seemed to drop to the ground. Below, in Joe Lucky's meadow, a milk cow grazed under the hovering, rotating flying saucers. The cow placidly munched on a mouthful of grass. The Texas Doves cooed from below. A dog barked, far away. Sarah babbled hysterically in Spanish. Joe Lucky's ranch house and giant red barn slumbered on the valley floor.

And then, in the wink of an eye, a laser fired a beam down from the belly of one flying saucer and sliced the cow in half--head to tail--dumping brains, blood and entrails onto the grass.

One half of the cow's mouth still tried to masticate and one eye still blinked stupidly on the grass.

Sarah ripped out a lung-clearing scream. She pulled her hair and stomped her bare feet.

Jerry took hold of her flaying arms. "You're going to set the critters on us," he said. "Hush up."

One flying saucer made a screeching sound as if it was grinding gears and suddenly plunged down into the grass like an exhausted Frisbee.

Jerry and Sarah stood transfixed in moonlight and madness.

Joe Lucky lay in bed with his hands at his sides, stark naked. He was dark and fairly handsome at forty. He had black hair and brown piercing eyes. His nose was slightly crooked from an old football injury, but his smile was endearing and carried him through life as a likable chap. Nobody could stay mad at Joe Lucky for long, only the semi-mechanic Max Campos. He listened to his wife's soft snores beside him. She had one long naked leg exposed. Rachel was still a knock-out at thirty-eight. She had smooth pale skin, and a lot of grey brain mass between eyes that were as blue as the Sea of Cortez. She had a compassion for all creatures, man and beast. He often called her "Rachelicious" in moments of mischief and affection. He was sorry for all the stress he was putting on her and his little daughter Summer, a bundle of black-haired fury. And that was why he was awake, hands at his hips--all because he was buried in bank notes, bad luck, back taxes, empty bottles of Jack Daniels, and debt up to his naked buttocks. Sleep was as rare as money on the J. Lucky Ranch.

Thoughts of despair were galloping in his mind when he noticed the bright pulsating lights frolicking on his bedroom window. Joe Lucky tip-toed to the window. He extended his head directly into an eerie glow and he sucked in his breath.

Joe Lucky watched the flying saucer spin feebly in the grass of his meadow. The other flying saucer hovered in the air in bursts of red and orange, mourning its wounded mate. And then it soared off. . . taking giant frog leaps into space like a time machine until it dissipated into the winking stars. He ran for his

jeans. He appeared on the porch, yanking on a scuffed cowboy boot but tripped and did a header into the dust of the yard. Duke, more black snout than anything, exited the dog house and barked up at the starry sky.

On Panocha Ridge, Jerry guided a near comatose Sarah to the truck. The vehicle's headlights were flashing on and off. The windshield wipers smeared the Texas dove into more red swirls. Jerry tossed the whimpering Sarah into the truck and in a moment they were speeding off the ridge, hell bent for sanctuary. Joe Lucky could see the headlights of Jerry's truck, zigzagging crazily down the switchback road. He yanked on his other boot and ran for the huge red barn. Joe Lucky swung open the big double doors to reveal his ancient John Deere tractor.

Tacked on the door of the barn was
a hand painted sign:

COME SEE SNIPPY, FIRST HORSE
KILLED BY ALIEN CREATURES.
ADMISSION: ONE
DOLLAR.