



Excerpt from *Golondrina and the White Butterflies*

It was one of those days of summer, one of those hot days when the sweat from the feet of insects makes sizzling sounds on the rocks. On the banks of the Cuadrante Lake, Golondrina sat mending a fishing net. The cool blue waters lapped at her feet. The tall grasses around her swayed in the slight breeze. Even when the grass grazed her cheek and jumping fish splashed water over her toes, Golondrina couldn't think of anything but the discomfort of a tiny desire, a desire so small that if you were to hold it in your hand you would see it was the size of the seed of a copinol tree. For a moment, she looked up from the fishing net and toward the path which led from her village, Santa Maria de las Diez, to the nearby town of San Benito de las Once, and she wanted more than anything to move with her family to San Benito.

In San Benito, she'd heard, they played many games that had not yet reached Santa Maria and, in San Benito, the mangos that she loved so much grew to the size of pumpkins. Most of all, though, after growing up in Santa Maria, she wanted to live in a new place with new people and make new friends. In Santa Maria, the village celebrated with a feast every time the moon was full, and in San Benito, they celebrated with a feast every new moon under a sky filled with twinkling stars.

"I really wish my family could move to San Benito," Golondrina said to no one in particular. A swirling cloud of mayflies stopped to listen, but only for a moment. Golondrina let out a deep sigh, and the desire in her heart burst like a dandelion in a strong wind and fed an idea that she should try to do what she could to make her wish come true.

Golondrina pulled up the fishing net up from the water and, seeing a caterpillar, decided she would explain to it what she had started to relate to the mayflies. "You know, caterpillar, in a few days we will celebrate the Day of the Fiesta fo the New Faces. If my sister or brother is born before then, we may be the famly chosen from Santa Maria to move to San Benito." The disinterested caterpillar twisted about and continued its journey around her and toward the path up the mountain. "I guess caterpillars aren't concerned with such things."

Each year, during the Day of the Fiesta of the New Faces, a family of four was chosen from each village to move to the next one. On that day, a big celebration took place to welcome the new family. Golondrina's family, made up of her mother, father and herself, lacked one member to make four. For six years, Golondrina's mother had awaited the birth of her second child. The baby would not be born until the passing of Santa Maria's oldest resident, Don Cuervo.

Santa Maria de las Diez was one of the twelve villages which surrounded the bright blue waters of the Cuadrante Lake. The edge of each village stood exactly

forty meters from the lake. Exactly ten kilometers separated each village from the next. Even when the strong winds blew and lifted the thatched-roof huts from the ground, the villages never varied from these positions. Surrounding them all were the cloud-topped Mountains Bastante Altas.

It was curious, but at that time, in each of the towns on the lake, a visitor could ask each woman, man, child and baby to line up and the visitor would always scout one hundred people—never more, never less. A new baby was never born unless someone, usually the oldest person in the village, died. Most people were healthy and lived very long lives, except in the rare case that someone did something extremely foolish. This hadn't happened in Santa Maria since years before when a man named Pavo ate two dozen pears, tied wooden paddles to his hands and feet, and attempted to swim the circumference of the Cuadrante Lake. When he was not seen for days and a new baby was born, it was believed that Pavo had drowned somewhere along the way.

Golondrina's mind was still preoccupied with her longing as she folded her net, as she dropped the day's catch into a basket after throwing back the smallest of the fish, and as she made her way up the path toward her home. She had never told her parents of this longing. Her mother had attributed Golondrina's constant sighing to the spores from the grasses growing up the mountainside. Everyone knows that the spores sometimes lodge in the throat or in the stomach. There they turn into hard objects which make sleeping and eating difficult and bring on constant sighing.

As she walked up the path, Golondrina passed the other women preparing to end their day fishing. None was a better fisher than Golondrina. Every morning, without fail, her net filled with fish of many sizes and many colors. It was the custom in all of the towns on the lake that the women fished and the men tended the crops planted on the side of the mountains for half of each year. When the half-

year was over, the women changed to farmers and the men to fishers. But all year long, Golondrina fished, because her net always filled with fish and because, in this way, her life passed contentedly.

Just before reaching her home, Golondrina heard noises coming from inside. The noises were rhythmic, as if the house itself were drawing in deep breaths and exhaling loudly through the breaks in the walls.

Golondrina opened the door and found her mother, Paloma, sitting in the middle of the room, her weighty body covered with perspiration and planted in a chair. “Ay de mi!” her mother lamented. “It has been so long since I was comfortable! And how long it has been since I slept in peace!” She rose slowly from the chair and began to wash the table in front of her with long strokes of her rag in a rhythm that matched her breathing. Golondrina rushed forward to help her.

“Sit down, mama!” Golondrina begged her suffering mother.

Her mother continued her lament. “All night long, all day long, I hear his little voice crying from inside me, ‘Free me! Free me!’ I don’t think I can stand anymore!” With her last word spoken, Golondrina’s mother fell back into the chair.

The moment had arrived, thought Golondrina, for something to be done. She gathered up her courage and left for the house of Don Cuervo.

In the late afternoon sun, Golondrina walked up the hill past the children playing and through the sparkling water streaming down the mountain. Across the stream, she came upon a tiny house tucked away in the hillside. In a small chair pressed against the outside wall of the hut sat the aged man, a man who had lived more than 100 years. As he slept, his snores echoed loudly through the clearing. On his head he wore a red cap. From his face grew a long, gray beard which moved upward as it was drawn in by his breath.

The scent of the day's catch, clinging to her clothing and pressed into her hands, always preceded Golondrina. As she inched closer to him, the elderly man awoke with a start and shouted, "What swims this way?!"

"No one, Don Cuervo," she said. "It's me. Golondrina."

"Ah, muchcacha." He laughed a cackling laugh. "I must have been dreaming." He stretched his arms above his head and yawned. For several moments he was frozen in that position, until he dropped his arms and asked her, "Why did you come all this way to talk with me?"

"I wanted to talk with you..." Golondrina paused, unsure of what else to say. "I wanted to talk with you about...about...the state of my mother, Dona Paloma." After that, no matter how much she tried, no words would leave Golondrina's mouth.

Don Cuervo raised his eyebrows—first one, then the other, then both together. He jumped from his chair and let out another laugh. "I already know why you are here, Golondrinita," he said. "You want to know why I'm still alive, no?"

"No! That's not..." The unexpected movement caused Golondrina to jump back against a tree.

Don Cuervo inched closer, looking into her eyes while wearing a sly smile on his face. He again raised one eyebrow and lowered his voice. "I will tell you why. You know my two great-great-grandsons, don't you?"

Golondrina did know them, two foolish young men who acted just like their father, Pavo. "They both love the fish you bring from the lake. If you move from Santa Maria—and I know that you will if you have the opportunity—then you will no longer bring them so many wonderful fish."

With the sound of his laughter still ringing in her ears, Golondrina walked back down the path and toward her home.

The day of the fiesta came. There was music and dancing and food and games, but Golondrina sat alone away from the party. She didn't even join everyone to say goodbye to the family that was leaving, nor to greet the new family that arrived that evening.

The day after the fiesta, Don Cuervo went to sleep in his chair as he did every afternoon. When his grandson came to wake him, all that was left was the sound of Don Cuervo's snores echoing throughout the clearing. A red cap rested on the seat of his empty chair.

Shortly after, Golondrina's brother was born.

To purchase Golondrina and the White Butterflies, go to Amazon.com