

About the Kodiak airplane:

In 2001, Tom Hamilton, a Christian kit-plane designer, and David Voetman, a Mission Aviation bush pilot, launched Quest Aviation Company. Its vision: to design an airplane that could haul a large load in and out of short, rough strips while burning jet fuel and complaining very little about the abuse, at a price the average humanitarian organization could afford and maintain. Since mission groups helped finance the project, every tenth plane is sold to a mission at cost.

The first plane was sold in 2004, and by 2009, the year of this story, approximately fifty early model Kodiaks had been manufactured and sold to both missions and other companies.

About the settings:

This story is set in the northern area of Guatemala called the *Petén*. Guatemala is a small country with as many variations in landscape as the entire United States—deserts, lush forests, plantations, mountains, and both hot and cool climates. This book does not attempt to describe the many facets of Guatemala. Nor does it describe the complete face of Canada, with its lake lowlands and plains and mountains. The area of Sudbury is in Ontario's near north.

Chapter One

THE YEAR I was twelve, I noticed I didn't fit in. Not in Guatemala. Not in my parents' country. Not anywhere.

It was because of the Coke. I had been swinging on the gate when I spotted my friend Juanito¹ sauntering down the street like he had money in his pocket. Mom was scrubbing clothes at the *pila*² on the covered patio, so I called over to ask, "Mom, can I walk with Juanito?"

"Sí."³ Mom gave Juanito a smile and a friendly wave as he passed. "Please be back in twenty minutes."

I skittered out the gate and caught up to Juanito, who, of course, was headed to the *tienda* to buy a snack. Guys like Juanito thought I was rich because we had one of the only vehicles in the village and because I frequently traveled and because when I got a cavity in my tooth, I got it fixed. But my parents lived frugally in other ways. For instance, I never had snack money.

Thankfully, the Guatemalan way is to share your successes. A bag of *tortrix*⁴ or a swallow of Coke might be coming my

¹ hwah-NEE-toh

² PEE-lah – a concrete sink for water storage and washing

³ see – yes

⁴ TOR-trecks – chips made from freshly fried corn



way. Because when Juanito got money, he spent it right away. On snacks.

Our village was named Hace Frío,⁵ “It’s Cold,” a little joke in the hot area known as the Petén.⁶ The village was named for a pool nearby with an underground spring that bubbled cool water even in the hottest seasons. Like many villages, we had dirt, smoke, garbage, fiercely loving families, and eternal family feuds.

My missionary parents and I and our host of lizards lived in an orange-painted, stuccoed house on the last street before the river, and Miriam and Lily, the nurses, lived in a turquoise one just down the way.

“Did you sell another slingshot?” I asked Juanito as we ambled up the dusty road.

“Sí.” Juanito smiled.

“Yours are the best,” I said, before Juanito could.

“Sí.” His smile flashed large, then he turned thoughtful. “The mayor says I should sell a lot more.”

Half the boys over ten already had a slingshot, although some of us whittled our own. I didn’t have money to buy one of Juanito’s, so I said, “Maybe you should take them to sell at the market in La Libertad.”⁷

Juanito shrugged. “He thinks people should spend less money on Coke and *tortrix* and make sure every boy has a slingshot. Even little guys.”

⁵ AH-seh FDEE-oh

⁶ peh-TEHN

⁷ lah lee-behd-TAHDTH

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I frowned, trying to figure out why the mayor would say that. “I have a slingshot.”

Juanito nodded. “Have you hit anything lately?”

“Of course.” I bristled. Then I had to admit, “But not much that I meant to.”

Juanito nodded. “You and lots of others.”

I sniffed, jealous of Juanito’s accuracy. But I recognized I didn’t have the same motivation—I didn’t go hungry when I missed.

As we approached the small tin-roofed block structure that was one of the two *tiendas* in the village, the street became glutted with junk. Foil snack baggies and empty pop bottles and black plastic bags lay in drifts where the wind had gathered them. Pedro’s skinny dogs scattered the junk as they rummaged for crumbs. Juanito and I kicked our way through the clutter.

The *tienda* had a covered patio outside with a low wall surround. On the patio, plastic tables and chairs provided a place for people, mostly men, to gather. We stepped over the low wall, bringing a healthy portion of street dust onto the red tile floor.

“Hey!” came a voice from inside the large window. “That’s what the walkway is for!”

Juanito and I snorted giggles. It was Chico’s job to keep the patio clean. Since Chico⁸ spent his days surrounded by snacks and had the girth to prove it, we boys at times attempted to provide him with a bit of work.

⁸ CHEE-koh



Juanito jingled his *quetzales*⁹ as he leaned against the window opening, considering the choices. They were the same as last week and the week before. Rice, beans, chewing gum, spices, eggs, shampoo in packets for a single wash, sometimes a potato. And snacks—lots and lots of pop and small baggies of snacks.

Chico popped chewing gum, something I hadn't tasted for weeks, as he watched Juanito and ignored me. He ripped a baggie of *tortrix* from the pinch-rack and tore it open, dumping half of it into his mouth and chewing it along with his gum, all with his mouth open. If that was supposed to promote sales, it kind of worked. I wanted to trade places with him.

Juanito lowered his chin and said, deep-voiced. "Three-liter." "Limón¹⁰ or Coke?" Chico asked, through his mouthful of chips.

"Coke." Juanito spun his *quetzales* on the counter while Chico shifted boxes away from the front of the cooler. Juanito scanned the racks, and I waited. The spicy snacks on Chico's breath smelled good, wafting through the window. But Juanito jingled his remaining coins distractedly.

The cooler door squealed as Chico opened it at last. "Guess what? Maybe there'll be a *competencia*¹¹ soon! I heard *mi papá*¹² say something."

⁹ keht-S AHL-e hs – plural form of *quetzal* (keht-S AHL), the monetary unit of Guatemala

¹⁰ lee-MOHN – lemon

¹¹ coh-m-peh-TEHNS-yah – contest

¹² mee pah-PAH – my dad

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“What kind of *competencia*?” Juanito asked.

Chico shrugged. “I’ll tell you when I know.” He passed over the Coke and glanced at me. “Bag?” he asked.

Juanito hesitated and then nodded, surprising me.

I watched Chico slide the Coke, cold beads condensing on the outside, into a black plastic bag. Juanito grabbed the handles and swung it at his side. We left through the proper walkway, scuffing our *caites*¹³ in the dust. I tried not to resent that Juanito had put the Coke out of sight. Usually, snacks were shared with the first friend to show up. I guessed he might need to bribe his brothers for something.

“Think there’s really a *competencia*?” I asked.

Juanito shrugged. “His *papá* is the mayor.”

“And owns the *tienda*.”

“And he’s part owner of a cattle ranch.”

I thought of the jolly mayor, who sometimes handed out candy to the boys as he walked the streets. He helped my dad find a man for boat repairs, roof repairs, motor repairs. He and Dad shared tools.

“The mayor is nice,” I said, wishing his son were as generous. “He’d bring lots of nice prizes.”

Juanito nodded. Pedro’s blackest, boniest dog wobbled out and nosed at Juanito’s bag, thoroughly ignoring village protocol. I swung my foot at it as we passed.

“Why does a poor man need seven dogs?” Juanito asked.

“I don’t know.”

¹³ KAHY-tehs – sandals



“So he has one to feed on every day of the week.”

I chortled. If you can't change a thing, laugh at it. I'd learned that from Juanito.

A chicken in the yard beside me gave a long rising note of warning. Her chicks dashed toward her. Juanito threw the plastic bag into my arms, and as I wondered if he'd bought the Coke for me, he yanked his slingshot from his pocket. In one smooth motion he inserted a stone, pulled back the leather cup, and fired.

I looked up just in time to see a hawk plummet from a tree behind the chickens.

Juanito ran to pick it up, and I rushed after him. He smoothed the short white down of the breast away from a small spot the color of rust. Beneath the feathers, the small heart beat a few more times, then stopped.

Juanito poked a finger into the bird. “*Caldo*,”¹⁴ he said. A nice soup.

It was a magnificent shot. Juanito's white teeth flashed in a grin. “It will be worth my while to gather the wood today,” he said. Whenever Juanito wasn't busy gathering wood for his mama's cook fire, he was busy complaining about it. I thought if he brought home the meat, he might get a break.

“Maybe you won't need to gather the wood today,” I said, handing back his bag.

“I never *need* to gather wood. Unless I want to eat.”

We reached my yard gate, and Mr. Squeaky, my pet

¹⁴ KAHL-doh

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coatimundi,¹⁵ ran to meet me, his elegant ringed tail held high. He chittered as he jogged up on four legs. Well, not quite four. I picked him up and scratched behind his ears.

“Francisco,” Juanito said, “you need to get rid of him. Someone will kill him soon.”

Mr. Squeaky nibbled at my ear, then squirmed away to run along the top of the fence and leap to the ground. He ran through the lawn, braked so hard he nearly tumbled, backtracked, and stuck a long curved claw into a patch of dead grass. He lifted out a bug and chewed it with quick, dainty bites.

“If he eats a chicken, he’s done. And you’re going to have to pay for the chicken.”

“I don’t have money to pay for a chicken,” I said.

Juanito gave me an incredulous look. Clearly, he didn’t believe me. He shifted his bag into the hand where the hawk dangled, shook my hand with an *adiós*, and left. I watched Mr. Squeaky dash after a stray cat, pondering. In our little village where every wrong had to be set right, what *would* happen if my pet ate a chicken?

Mr. Squeaky caught up to the cat, who leaped high at his coming. The two tumbled through a round of play, first one on top and then the other. Both seemed to be having fun, but Mr. Squeaky was getting stronger. The lack of one front paw didn’t seem to limit him much anymore. It wasn’t hard to imagine him pouncing on a chicken.

¹⁵ coh-ah-tee-MOON-dee – a tropical mammal related to the raccoon but with a longer snout and tail



Fitting In, Frankly

I called Mr. Squeaky over. He jumped on my arm and balanced there, tail straight, claws digging into my skin. I cracked my knuckles as I watched Juanito walk down the street. He wandered over to two boys shuffling a flat ball along the soccer field, showed them his hawk, and then pulled the Coke from the black bag and unscrewed the cap. I could almost hear the hiss from where I stood, dry-mouthed, at my gate.

Juanito took a long swig and offered them some. Then he picked up the hawk and continued toward home, his friends at his side. I bit my lip as the cold Coke passed back and forth between them.

Chapter Two

I WENT INTO the house and lifted a plastic cup from the open shelving, then filled it from the blue water jug on the counter-top. I forced down an entire cup of warm, stale water. I had a fair complexion that tended to burn, and I didn't feel well in the heat if I didn't drink enough.

Mom came in the door with a basket of dry laundry. "Lily would like to walk out to Don Esteban's¹ ranch to visit her diabetes patient. Would you like to go with her, or shall I ask one of the village boys?"

"What would you pay a village boy to do it?"

"Enough to get a square meal tonight. Which you're already getting," Mom said. "Maybe you'd rather work on cutting the grass."

"I'll go."

Lily was the younger of the nurses, dark-haired and bright-eyed—and best of all, recently arrived and still enthralled by every new experience. I lost no time scooting down the street to the clinic.

The covered cement porch was empty, which meant the nurses had seen all their patients before the afternoon's heat. Lily peeked out the door and saw me coming. An instant later she met me, holding a bag and wearing a large straw hat.

¹ dohn ehs-TEH-bahn – *Don* is a title of respect.

