

[word count: 2499]

Maquila Bird

Maru reached for another jacket and draped it across the sewing table. Before starting, she took a moment to adjust the plastic specimen bottle strapped to her belly. It was warm, a comfort against tender skin. She revved her machine and guided the garment to the pouncing needle. As the quality control tag—*Made with care by / Hecho con el cuidado por 867*—met the needle plate, Maru inserted a different tag behind it and finished the seam. It took the merest flick of a finger; no one saw her do it. Where would her handiwork end up? Perhaps a tall and loud American girl in New York or LA would sling Maru's creation over her shoulder for a winning look. She liked to think so.

Pukka-pukka-pukka filled the room and her head and her bones. It was the sound of steel puncturing denim, Maru's first stitch tracking to infinity, joining the stitches of a thousand other workers. They sat in numbered rows in the harshly lit hangar of an abandoned airfield on the outskirts of Tijuana. Today it was jean jackets, but not always. Sometimes they made lingerie and other times, outfits for yoga, tennis, or jogging, clothes good for only one thing.

The workers had clothes for just one thing: working. Dress code was a loose pink smock and matching surgical cap. Management was strict about hair; Señor Ramos inspected for flyaway wisps during the mandatory team cheer that began each day. During break, Maru and her friends dissected his hair obsession.

“It’s for sanitation,” said Juanita, Maru’s almost-sister-in-law, whose lovesick mooning had been driving Maru crazy.

“Regulations, maybe,” Maru said.

“We’re not making food,” Lucinda said. “Nor medicine.”

Rosita snorted. “It’s so he can look at your neck, obviously. Sicko.” She tapped her cigarette ash onto the picnic table where they sat for break.

“But the uniforms—it’s nice not to worry about what to wear,” Maru said. “If you fall behind, they don’t know immediately who it is.”

“Oh, I was waiting for this,” Rosita said. She groaned. “*Maria Eugenia*. Maru-baby. You love this dump so much? Is that why you’re always singing? You do realize that over there”—she pointed north, toward the border—“they gain in one hour what we make working all day.”

“What can we do?” Juanita said. “There is much we cannot change.”

Rosita exhaled a stream of smoke. “There will be no change as long as we do nothing.”

Maru shrugged. She didn’t envy anyone. She hugged herself and felt, beneath the smock, her golden treasure. It sloshed with every movement. She was probably the only one who could hear it, but she’d been pretend-coughing whenever the machines stopped, wanting to fill the sudden void with a sound more definite than the ringing in her ears and the buzzing of the gigantic lights mounted overhead.

Her lips twitched. Smuggling something as disgusting as urine into the plant was hilarious. Only Juanita knew, for it was she who had donated the precious fluid that was going to get Maru through test day. If Maru flunked the test, she’d be fired over a fabrication, marched out of the building, and replaced by another girl from the perpetual line of applicants. Rosita’s

sister had been terminated in just this way, so the company could avoid paying motherhood benefits.

Señor Ramos appeared on the other side of the chain-link fence, pacing. They took their time standing up. Rosita cursed under her breath and ground her cigarette into the dirt.

Maru was delayed by her need for the bathroom, so she was alone when Señor Ramos stopped her. They stood just inside the shop door, which was left open to catch a non-existent breeze. She stepped back, but he held her arm with moist hands. He didn't accord her the respect due to a married woman.

"Tough times ahead, Maria Eugenia" He scanned the horizon of the industrial park as if taking in the CNN business update and said, "We find ourselves in a surplus employee situation. Definitely, no syndicates are needed here. And take care, my dear. Little gatherings turn quickly into nefarious activities."

"Señor?" Maru reclaimed her arm.

"Ladies chatting might be swapping recipes or they might be holding undesirable meetings; how am I to know? You're a team player, so I'm telling you now." He leaned in and sniffed deeply. "Is that perfume?"

Maru focused her gaze on the open collar of his *guayabera*. She spoke softly to his wattles. "Señor, this is only church talk. You yourself would be most welcome at our services—even my husband and brother like to go." She flushed at this bit of embroidery: Hector refused to attend church on the grounds that he was allergic to bullshit, and Adalberto was away.

Señor Ramos lifted her chin, forcing her to look at his face. “Is that so? I suggest that you girls watch yourselves.”

Two months had passed since Adalberto’s departure. He followed the picking season as it rolled north with the hot weather, from Georgia all the way to Ontario. Maru knew better than to hope for a letter from her brother. Any news would have to come from Juanita; *she* would receive phone calls, but Maru didn’t begrudge desperate lovers. If only Juanita would quit wailing and dragging around like a widow. Just this morning on the bus, bouncing over potholes, she’d smoothed Juanita’s cheek, gently chiding. “Birds come back, don’t they? And butterflies? Everything has its season.”

“My Adal-beeeerrrrr-to,” Juanita yodelled. She opened her mouth to start again, but Maru clapped a hand over her lips, and they collapsed in giggles.

Juanita regarded her seriously. “Don’t you feel sick, Maru?” She grabbed the seat to steady herself. “This ride makes me want to puke, and I’m not even—”

Maru covered Juanita’s mouth again.

“We’re here,” she said. “Let’s sew something beautiful.”

Sitting with Hector after supper every evening, Maru transformed the boring quality control tags that she carried home. Last night, she made bronze suns in the Aztec style, one after

another. She stopped to study her needlework, then pulled the thread taut and knotted it in back. This sun beamed at her; it winked as if to say, how sly you are, my creator, how skilful.

Humming, Maru stippled the rays with silver. Practice had paid off. Her pieces were becoming more intricate, miniature tapestries showing off the wealth of colour in her mending basket. She'd been collecting the thread at work; little bits weren't missed.

This design was one of many joyful variations in her repertoire: flower-laden hearts, musical notes, rainbows, moon-and-stars. Lately, Maru had been experimenting with stylized patterns that held no obvious meaning but still made her happy, and that emotion couldn't help but be transmitted to the ultimate owner of the garment. Her needle went in and out and around the tag until it was impossible to see the number of the worker who cared enough to customize jackets before they were baled like hay, loaded into shipping containers, and trucked northward.

"Why do you bother with those things?" Hector said, flipping channels to find their *telenovela*. "This week Luisa is supposed to reconcile with her slutty daughter, the one who's dying of mutant viruses. Pay attention or you'll miss it."

Maru shook her head. "Such a pity men can only do one thing at a time."

Why bother indeed? She had also wondered. Like a kid with a can of spray paint, she never tired of leaving her mark. All she could do was be careful. She paced herself, inserting only one decorated tag for every fifty or so jackets that she produced. The official tag covered hers completely. Señor Ramos discovering her embellishment was as likely as a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

Her body had not changed on the outside, yet Maru felt different. Her breasts tingled without warning, flashing on and off. In the lower abdomen, nothing definite; at times she couldn't even accept that she was pregnant. But this peeing all the time was becoming a problem.

The zone superintendent, an old woman named Teresa, said, "*Hija*," when she asked for the washroom pass. "Again?"

"And what should I do? I have to go."

"Save some for the test. Licenciada Vargas will be here shortly." Teresa gave her the pass.

"Yes, it will soon be our turn to piss in the cup. Good luck, *abuelita*" Maru said, squeezing Teresa's shoulder as she passed.

"Smart mouth! You're the one who needs it," Teresa called after her.

Squatting in the dingy stall, Maru remembered how she and Hector had planned to wait before starting their family, saving money for the future. Only they weren't planners by nature. They decided not to decide. "There are hidden gifts in everything," she told him, "to be revealed at the right time."

Maru shook the container and listened to the liquid. She cupped her breasts, marvelling at how heavy and warm they were.

Back at her station, Maru surveyed her growing pile of jackets. Other girls made mistakes or nicked themselves, ruining the product with their blood, but Maru had nimble fingers. She

pushed fabric through the thrumming machine, singing against the noise. Today she picked mariachi music. If it weren't for the din, anyone would recognize the song as an old familiar played by strolling men in plazas across the land. Her friends would tease her about being a sentimental fool. Well, let them have their fun. Maru looked around the shop, but she couldn't pick any friends out of the pink crowd.

Licenciada Vargas was now at the far corner, tapping girls on the shoulder. Maru finished the placket of a right sleeve and began the left. The chosen filed out to the washroom, where nurses stood by to document illicit pregnancy hormones. After each row, the lady turned on spike heels and studied the workers as if making a big decision. Maru almost burst out laughing. Hmm, she thought sarcastically, who will it be?

Every month, Licenciada Vargas spent five days in a zone; each day she picked every fifth girl; by the end of the week, all were tested. Today was Maru's day. Another hour at most, she estimated, watching the fine lady. Waiting was hard, but she had a plan. She began to sing a lullaby.

When Adalberto returned in the fall, it was his custom to talk and talk until he wound down to his normal state of silence. She and other family members would listen, trying to imagine Adalberto's migrant days: the harvest of smooth tomatoes, still radiating heat; the waves of exhaustion after picking a field clean; the state of every trailer he'd slept in. "True fact," he said. "You can tell how far you've traveled by the size of the bugs. The colder the air, the smaller they grow."

As he was leaving this time, Adalberto hugged her and said, “Next year, we go all together. You and Hector come with me.”

It would be hard, dirty work, Maru knew. Dangerous for Mexicans over there. But she wouldn't be alone. Their family would grow and prosper. They'd return home every season.

Maru still had to persuade Hector. She predicted he'd soon tire of the assembly line, tapping metal panels into place. His destiny was not to make mini-bar fridges. It was true that Hector's maquiladora was better—clean and new, without textile fibres to cloud the air and darken one's snot on the kleenex. But he could never be content in a windowless room, timing his movements to match the speed of appliances gliding past him. Maru had reason to hope: next year, in the north, together.

Sewing and singing, singing and sewing: Maru didn't mind repetition. A natural rhythm governed her work. Even though Licenciada Vargas loomed closer, Maru decided the next jacket should receive extra artistry. She reached into her pocket for the embroidered tag, a scarlet parrot, and made the insertion undetected. Immediately, Maru felt compelled to do it again—she fingered the raised design on a tag, trying to guess which it was—but disciplined her mind. The time was not right.

Maru dreamed of her designs traveling places she'd never go, perhaps as far as London or Paris. Daily, she sent her creations out into the world. Wouldn't it be a miracle if, someday, one of them came back to her?

A sharp fingernail dug into Maru's shoulder. Her hands flew up and away from the needle for safety. She'd been ready for the test, had looked forward to it, but now blushed and stumbled getting up.

Fifteen minutes later, it was over. The specimen bottle was still around her waist, empty now. Maru silently thanked Juanita for her gift. Another month of employment, at least a month.

Shortly before quitting time, Maru was startled by shadows falling over her sewing table. Once again, her hands flew away. She'd been singing in full-voice and was embarrassed to realize that Señor Ramos and Licenciada Vargas stood on either side of her.

"Come with us," Señor Ramos said. They walked her to the locker she shared with Juanita. Licenciada Vargas carried a box of tissues.

"Collect your things," he said. "Unfortunately, this must be your last day."

Maru laced her fingers together and said, "I had hoped that if ever my small interventions were noticed, they'd be seen as unique additions to our clothing. What looks bad can sometimes be revealed as good."

The managers looked puzzled. Señor Ramos cleared his throat.

"Maria Eugenia," Licenciada Vargas said. "According to your test results, you—well, you are expecting."

Maru stared at her feet, flooded with confusion. The samples—what had gone wrong? And then, recognizing the truth, she gasped. It took all her self-control to keep from whooping, but first she had to deal with these high-class clowns who expected her to mourn. She nodded:

yes, she understood. Yes, yes, she'd sign papers. She grabbed them from Señor Ramos, held her hand out for the pen, and signed with a flourish.

"There," she said, slipping the smock off, letting it fall to the floor.

Senor Ramos said, "If you need to call someone—"

"Goodness, we usually see tears," said Licenciada Vargas.

"I can certainly facilitate a phone call."

"I'm fine, fine," Maru said, waving them off. "*Beunos. Tardes.*" She crumpled the pink cap into a ball, releasing her scented hair to swing freely, and left them standing at the workers' entrance.

Maru nearly ran to the bus stop. How she wished she could shout the news of a nephew or niece, companion for her son or daughter, almost a sibling, but she had to wait for Juanita. Surely, she was being discarded too. It wouldn't be long. For these few moments, Maru was the only person who knew the whole story, bitter and sweet. She alone could see the journey unfolding for all of them, far away in the north, together.