



## THE LEASE OPTION

María Amparo Escandón

“We could lease the peninsula to the Japanese, now that’s a solution right there,” said Claudia half an hour before the car skidded and went off the road. She and Fernando had been traveling for eight hours on their way to look at an oceanfront lot down in Baja. They might like the spot and buy it. They might build a big house full of rooms and light and sea breeze. They might set up a Bed & Breakfast for American tourists looking to pet the whales or go fishing. It was Fernando’s plan. A likely, feasible plan.

“You talk like the decision was yours to make,” said Fernando. “That’s never going to happen. Think about it.”

“It’s just such a perfect idea. Everyone wins. The Japanese lease from Tijuana to Cabo San Lucas for ninety-nine years to the Mexican Government and bring their factories right next door to their number one customer, saving billions in transportation. The Mexicans’

employment situation gets solved instantly. Our workforce learns the Zero-Defects philosophy becoming productive once and for all. We put the hefty lease money into much needed areas around the nation, like building schools, for instance. And when the deal is over, we get to keep the land, the infrastructure and the know-how. Don't you think the Japanese would really turn this place around? I mean, look at what they've done with their little island."

"That's nonsense, Claudia. The Mexican Government would never do something like that."

"Why not? Maybe they would if we told them."

"You're just wasting your saliva and my ears. I'd rather listen to the radio."

"We're too far from any place to catch a station." She scanned through the dial but found only static. "See? Nothing. We should have brought some tapes."

"The tape player's broken."

For a few minutes they were silent. Claudia refused to throw her Baja California Peninsula Lease Option into the Bad Idea Bin, for now. She was an optimist. She held on to her ideas, no matter how far-fetched they were, at least for a while. Who knows? Maybe one would materialize. If only one did, just one, she would feel smart, or useful. She knew she would. She had felt smart before. Her ideas, many of them, had gone places. She had suggested her boss to sell half-page ads in the little biweekly magazine she had worked for, her first job ever, opening a new market of advertisers and doubling the publication's income. She had collected seven thousand three hundred and sixty-three signatures around her neighborhood and had gotten the County to build a park where once was a landfill across the street from her house. There was no end to it. But there was. The Bad Idea Bin was now full and she couldn't really pinpoint when this had happened. It certainly happened some time after she had met Fernando. After she had fallen in love with him. He was so sure of himself. He was so right, always. And practical. And in control of things. He wouldn't even let her drive, no matter how tired he was. So much she could love in him. So much she didn't have herself.

Claudia looked out the window. She imagined the barren desert all the way to the ocean filled with well-paved roads, a railway system, and ports with state-of-the-art wharves, industrial parks surrounded by grassy areas. And here and there, quiet towns, rows and rows of well-built homes, all of them with a yard and a tree. Schools for Mexican and Japanese children, learning from each other. The Mexicans, how to be more productive. The Japanese, how to better enjoy their free time. Bilingual education, a must. There would be plenty of natural reserves, ran by environmentalists from both countries. Fishing would be strictly regulated.

Fernando lit up and tossed the empty pack of cigarettes on the back seat. Claudia rolled down the window just a bit to let the smoke out.

"Shut the window. I've got the air conditioning going," said Fernando.

Claudia shut the window. She looked out again, squinting to avoid the smoke from getting into her eyes. It made her cry every time. Of all of Fernando's habits, that was the one she couldn't get used to after all those years together. Leaving a trail of clothes from wherever he undressed in the house to the bathroom was bothersome, but she didn't really mind much, to pick up after him. She was his wife. Listening every month to his complaints about the phone

bill wasn't even a big issue. "Can't you talk less? Can't you gossip with your mom in person?" he'd say on a good day. All husbands complain. Mowing the lawn in his white socks had been one darn habit of his. He liked the feeling of his shoeless feet against the padded fresh-cut grass. Claudia soaked and scrubbed and bleached and scrubbed again his socks every time, until one day he accidentally put his foot under the lawn mower and it chewed off three of his five toes. Since then, she took care of the yard. The gas allowance, that was more difficult. He'd fill her car's tank every other Saturday and if she ran out of gas mid-week, she'd have to ride the bus. Long nights she had dreamed that she found the key to the gas cap and stole it from Fernando to make a secret duplicate, but that never happened. He was too smart to leave it lying around.

He wasn't condescending. Just organized. But riding in the car with the windows rolled up while he smoked was becoming disturbing, annoying. In a few years, Fernando could be dying of emphysema. Although he was as healthy as an eight-hour sleep, she could still see him in the future gasping and hacking, coughing and choking in a hospital bed up until his last breath. Or maybe he'd die of cancer. Whatever the case, tobacco would do him in, one way or another. She looked at him, driving with the confidence of a seasoned trucker, his cigarette hanging from the edge of his lips. She felt guilty for having had the emphysema thought and put her hand on his lap as a way of making amends.

They passed another town, five hundred population, no more. "Ice cold beer every Saturday" read the sign in English on a tiny cinder block shack. "We fix flat tires," read another sign, this one right on an old tire leaning on the wall of the shop next door. Both businesses were closed. It was past noon.

"These Gringos, not only did they take half of our territory, they had to keep the nice side," said Fernando. Claudia had heard him say this over and over since his aunt Melchora, the one who lived in El Paso, said it at a family reunion. He thought the whole concept was awfully clever and kept it handy to repeat at the proper times. He'd usually add something like, "Just look at Tijuana and San Diego," but he didn't say it this time. He cleared his throat. Maybe he thought this wasn't a proper time. The town ended and the desert continued endless, permanent.

Fernando accelerated. They drove past a forest of saguaros. The saguaros kept their arms raised, like people being held at gunpoint, it seemed to Claudia. She smiled at the image.

"I could write a proposal to the President. The Lease Option," said Claudia.

"There you go again."

When Fernando opened his mouth to speak, the cigarette fell between his legs. He tried to find it before it burned a hole in the upholstered seat and, in his distraction, failed to negotiate the curve. The car skidded and went off the road, turning a few times before it finally stopped on its side.

Later that day, two fishermen on their way to Guerrero Negro noticed the wreckage and pulled over. They walked to the car and pushed it on its roof so that the older man could take the tires. They were in pretty good shape and fit his truck for sure. The younger one went for the suitcase. He and his wife could really use some new clothes. He could have taken more

stuff, but as much as he liked to listen to music, he left the tape player behind. Those things were usually broken anyway.

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