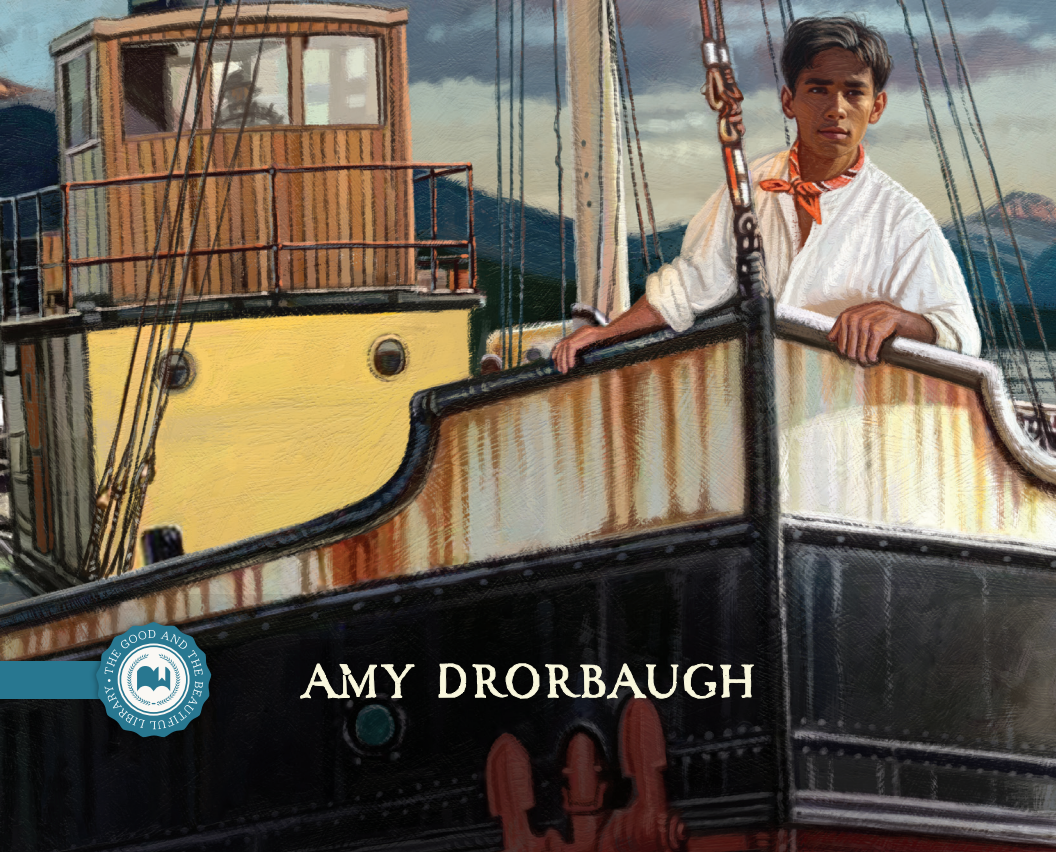


Eighty pesos



AMY DRORBAUGH

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Chapter One

A DROP OF SWEAT TRAVELED slowly down Antonio's temple and over his cheek, escaping the strip of fabric wound around his forehead to help prevent such occurrences. Accustomed to the immense heat, he ignored the sweat as he balanced the heavy steel rod in his hands. Confidently, he thrust the rod into the interior of the fiery furnace and gathered a ball of molten glass on the end of the long pipe.

"Just a bit more," he muttered, although no one could possibly hear him over the roar of the furnaces.

Finally satisfied, Antonio pulled the pipe out and admired the ball of glowing orange semiliquid glass clinging to the end. Even after two years, he hadn't lost his wonder of the process that turned common sand into liquid fire and, finally, solid glass.

He couldn't marvel for long. The glass was already cooling, so he walked briskly toward the mold pit in the floor. Lolo, the mold boy, used two long handles to open the steel mold block while Antonio turned the pipe upside

down and allowed the molten glass to flow downward into the mold. Antonio nodded at Lolo, who closed the mold tightly around the glass and the pipe, grimacing at the heat.

Now came the most difficult part. Filling his lungs, Antonio fit his mouth over the end of the hollow pipe and blew slowly. The air flowed down the length of the pipe, inflating the hot glass at the end and firmly pressing it into the mold.

Keeping his mouth on the end of the pipe to seal it, Antonio counted silently to ten and then tapped his foot twice. At this signal Lolo opened the mold, and Antonio used the pipe to lift the hot glass, which was no longer a shapeless mass but now a beautiful glass bottle.

Lolo gave him a nod as Antonio carried the bottle, still attached to the blowpipe, over to the bench. Setting the bottle gingerly on the padded surface, he carefully wet the bottle where it met the pipe, picked up a long steel tool, and hit the blowpipe sharply. The bottle detached perfectly, and Antonio heaved a sigh of relief as he transferred it to the annealing oven to cool. If it didn't crack while cooling, it would be ready to package and sell tomorrow.

Now he wiped the offending drop of sweat off his face and turned, only to discover Señor Vega standing right behind him. Antonio straightened up quickly, tugging his leather apron straight.

"*Muy bien*, Antonio," the glass master praised him. "How many bottles have you made today?"

Antonio flushed with pleasure. "*Cuarenta y dos*," he told his master.

Señor Vega raised an eyebrow. “Forty-two? Already? *Muy bien, muy bien.* Why don’t you follow me?”

A little bewildered by the attention, Antonio carefully replaced his blowpipe and hurried after his master. The other apprentices watched him leave, their eyes reflecting the same confusion.

Señor Vega led Antonio through the main workshop, where glass bottles were produced, and into the back room, where more experienced workers designed intricate stained-glass windows. This was one of only two glass-houses in Buenos Aires that produced stained glass. Antonio wanted to pause and watch the men piece together the colorful windows, but Señor Vega continued right into the final room of the workshop, his personal workspace.

As a master glassblower, Señor Vega didn’t concern himself with bottles or windows anymore—no, he spent his time creating handblown art. Vases in every color, fanciful glass animals, and spheres of cold glass with riots of colors swirling inside lined the shelves on the walls. To Antonio this room had always seemed like an exotic treasure cave.

With a glance for permission, he stepped over to examine one of the glass animals. Standing on four long legs, the peculiar animal with its strangely long neck was blown in yellow glass with black spots. Two tiny knobs protruded from its head, and the expression on its face was charmingly silly.

“What do you think?” Señor Vega asked him.

“It’s amazing!” Antonio exclaimed. “What is it?”

His master laughed and gestured for him to sit. “An animal that you and I will never see in our lifetimes. It’s a *girafa* from Africa. Look at these drawings. Giraffe, lion, elephant, zebra—I don’t know how I’m going to do those stripes yet—and even something called a rhinoceros!”

Antonio could hardly believe that these strange animals with their long necks and noses and horns could be real. Surely they were as fictional as the unicorns and dragons that Señor Vega made for the tourists!

Señor Vega put away the drawings and steeped his fingers, studying the boy in front of him. Antonio sat taller under the scrutiny.

“How old are you, Antonio?”

“*Catorce*, sir, but I’ll be fifteen soon.”

Señor Vega nodded. “Fifteen, hmm. You know, of course, that I was reluctant to take you on as an apprentice.”

“*Sí, señor.*” Antonio nodded, and his thoughts drifted back to the first time he had met the master.

Everyone had told Alonso Cruz, a common fisherman, that he was crazy to believe his son could be an apprentice glassblower.

“Bah! Take him fishing with you,” Teresa Toldini, the Italian woman who lived upstairs, had told him testily. “A fisherman’s good enough for the likes of him!”

“*Ja*, that’s true,” agreed Aunt Frida, the German woman from next door. “Don’t build up his hopes, Alonso.”

The others in the courtyard had all nodded in agreement,

but Alonso had just shaken his head good-naturedly at the grumbling. Later that night, he had pulled nine-year-old Antonio onto his lap. “Don’t you believe them, Antonio; you’re not going to be a poor fisherman like me. You’re going to be a craftsman.”

For three long years, Antonio had watched his mother and father scrimp and save every peso until one afternoon, Alonso had come home early from fishing, changed into his best shirt, and announced that it was time for Antonio to become an apprentice. Obediently, Antonio had followed his father to the closest glasshouse.

But it wouldn’t be that easy.

“Ay,” the first glass master had scoffed, “I can’t take a beggar off the streets! How would that look to my customers? No! Go, go!”

“Don’t worry, Antonio,” his father had reassured him. “There are many glasshouses in the city.”

But at each glasshouse, it was the same. No one would give a poor fisherman’s son a chance. Finally, they had come to Lorenz Vega’s impressive workshop in the very heart of Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina.

“No, Papá!” Antonio had tugged his father’s hand, trying to draw him away. “Not here.”

“Why not here?” Alonso had asked stubbornly. “It’s a glasshouse.”

“It’s too fine, too great for me,” Antonio had whispered, shamefaced, trying to hide from the stares of the passersby, who all seemed so richly dressed and important. “Let’s go home. I will fish.”

Alonso had bent down and looked his twelve-year-old straight in the eye. "Antonio, you're as good as anyone else. Look around!" He gestured at the finely dressed people. "Everyone here is the same! A child created by the same God, made in His image! The only difference is in here," he said as he rapped his knuckles on Antonio's forehead. "Education will change your life. It's 1903, a new century! In this century you can be anything you want to be, *¿sí?*"

"*Sí, Papá,*" Antonio whispered.

As Master Vega had approached, Alonso stood up and pulled the fisherman's cap off his head, holding it in his hands respectfully.

"*Buenas tardes, señor.* This is my son, Antonio," Alonso had said proudly. "He's going to be a glassblower."

Señor Vega's eyes had crinkled in amusement. "Oh, he is, is he?"

"Yes, sir. We have the price of an apprenticeship." Alonso urged Antonio forward, and conscious of what his father had just told him, Antonio lifted his eyes and looked directly at Señor Vega.

"Well, he's a likely-looking lad, but I don't need an apprentice today," he said, shaking his head.

"I understand, master," Alonso had said respectfully. "We will return tomorrow."

And they did.

Alonso had led his son back to the glasshouse every day for three weeks, and every day they were turned away. Antonio despaired of ever being accepted. But one day

when they arrived, Señor Vega had laughed ruefully and agreed to give Antonio a try.

“If you’re going to be here every day, you might as well work!” he had told Antonio with a chuckle, and Alonso had laughed with him as he handed over the precious pesos.

“Learn all you can, Antonio,” Alonso had urged him as he left. “He’s a master. Listen to everything he tells you, but also watch and learn everything he does. Today, your life has changed forever.”

So, as Antonio sat in Señor Vega’s workshop two years later, he knew full well how blessed he was to be there—blessed by his father’s faith and determination.

“*Sí*, I was very reluctant,” Señor Vega continued, “but you’ve worked hard. The journeymen tell me that your bottles never crack.”

Antonio kept his face relaxed, but his heart started racing. The master liked his work! The glass master only talked with the apprentices when they were in trouble or were about to be moved up. Señor Vega didn’t seem angry, so Antonio didn’t think he was in trouble. But apprentices weren’t promoted until at least their third year. Could his master possibly be about to promote him to journeyman a whole year early? His hands trembled with excitement.

“I think it’s time that we talked about—”

Señor Vega cut himself off as a clamor rose above the normal din of the furnaces. To Antonio’s surprise his little sister, Julieta, was running through the glasshouse, yelling at the top of her lungs.

“Toni! Toni!”

Antonio leaped to his feet, suddenly terrified. “Is it Mother?” he demanded, leaving his seat to meet his sister and grabbing her hands. “Did she have another attack?”

“No!” Julieta gasped frantically. “The police arrested Papá!”

“What?” Antonio tried to make sense of the words. Why would anyone arrest his father? He was the best, most honest man in all of Argentina! Julieta tugged on Antonio’s arm as he stood there in confusion.

“Go along, *chico*,” Señor Vega said with a worried look on his kind face.

Antonio allowed Julieta to pull him back through the glasshouse, her urgency contagious. Hand in hand they burst out onto the hectic city streets of Buenos Aires and were immediately slowed by the crowds of people. They threaded through the crowds, heading toward the river by cutting through dirty alleyways and across grassy plazas. When they reached the river and left the crowds behind, Antonio could finally ask, “What happened, Juli?”

Julieta started crying, “I don’t know! I was making dinner when Papá came flying through the door. All he said was *‘Lo siento’* before the police burst in and took him.”

Lo siento.

I’m sorry.

Antonio felt a chill run down his spine.

His sister led him not to their home but to a squat, ugly building on the edge of the river. Misery seemed to ooze from every crack and crevice of the jailhouse as they

tentatively opened the heavy door. A bored policeman sitting behind a desk listened to their request to see their father.

“Only one visitor,” he grunted uncaringly.

“You go home, Juli,” Antonio told his sister. “I’ll be there soon.”

As Julieta slipped back out the door, Antonio followed the police officer deeper into the gloomy building. He found it hard to breathe in the dark jail. Each breath seemed to absorb the unhappy atmosphere and sink unpleasantly into him. The policeman led him through another heavy door and stopped suddenly. Two slit windows near the ceiling let a tiny trickle of light into a dank cell holding forty to fifty spiritless men behind a row of iron bars.

“Five minutes,” the police officer muttered gruffly before he stalked out.

Approaching the bars slowly, Antonio searched through the unfriendly crowd for his father but couldn’t see him.

“Papá?” he called out faintly, his voice cracking.

Eighty Pesos

Antonio loves the miracle of sand turning into liquid fire and then solid glass. Through his apprenticeship, he hopes to become a master craftsman one day. That is, until his sister bursts into the glasshouse with the news that his papá has been wrongfully imprisoned. Antonio promises himself that he will free his father, unaware that this vow will lead him on the quest of a lifetime. His journey begins on the high seas but traverses the most unexpected places—with unexpected people—as Antonio learns that hard work and kindness can provide the truest freedom.

