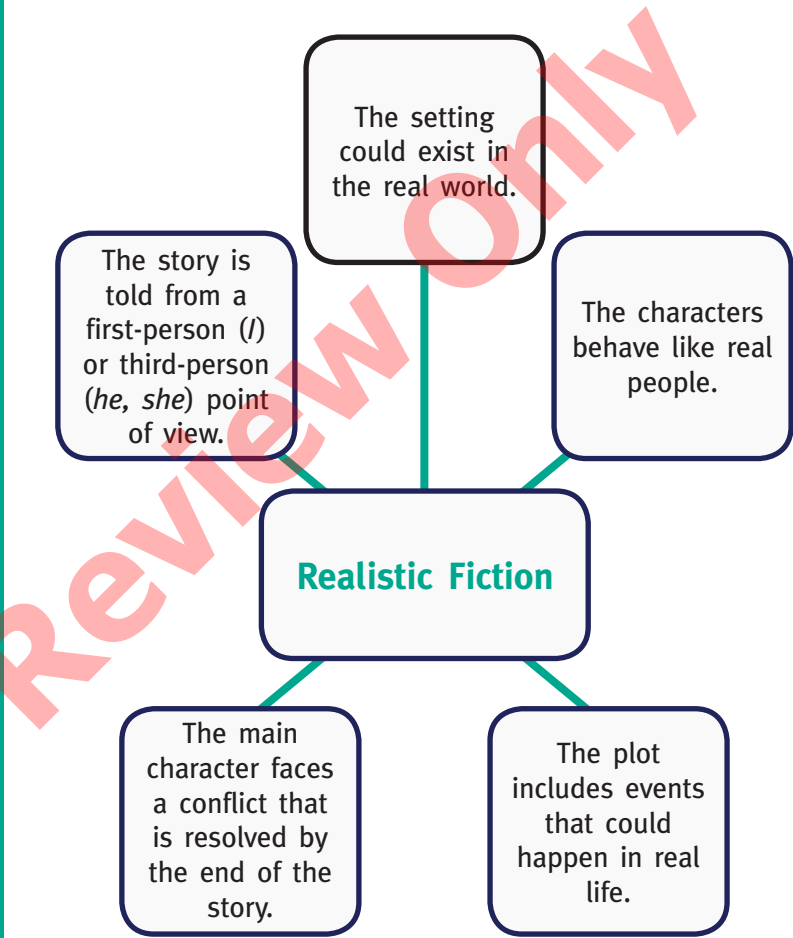


Tamales Made by the Sun



Realistic Fiction

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The Tamale Malfunction



Tomás and his older sister, Sofía, were setting the table for breakfast.

“It’s August,” said Mrs. Pérez, tapping the calendar on the wall as she placed a platter of scrambled eggs on the table.

Tomás looked up. *I know what that means*, he thought, then rolled his eyes and sighed.

“It’s time to start getting ready for the festival,” his sister Sofía exclaimed.

Each year, the family traveled from their home in Nebraska to the Corn Palace Festival in South Dakota. In the weeks before the festival, the family cooked hundreds of **tamales**. They wrapped, labeled, and packed them and then brought them to the festival to sell. Sofía already knew she wanted to take over the family tamale business when she was older, and she loved going to the festival. Tomás felt like the odd one out. He never enjoyed working in the tamale business, and he never really looked forward to going to the festival.

But this year will be different, Tomás thought to himself. He was entering his photography in the festival's Open Class **Exhibit** Book competition. For the first time, he was genuinely excited to go to the festival.

"Tomás, would you mind setting the table while your sister and I run out to check on the machine one last time?" Mr. Pérez asked. Then he turned to his wife. "We'll be right back."

The tamales were made in a small building right next to their house. Sofía handed Tomás her pile of napkins. Tomás could hear his dad talking to his sister. "If you're going to take over this business when you're older, then you've got to understand our equipment." It was something Tomás had heard his father tell his sister many times before.

Tomás set the table quietly, thinking about how he needed to get started preparing his photos for the festival. The screen door slammed.

"That was quick," Tomás said, looking up. His father was coming back inside, followed closely by his sister.

"Something's wrong with the **dehydration** station," his father said, his voice tinny and pinched with stress. His father slumped in a chair at the table.



“The machine we use to dry the corn **husks** isn’t getting hot enough,” his father said. “I’ll call a mechanic and see how quickly we can get this machine repaired.”

Tomás knew this was bad, but he was confused. He looked up at his sister as his father hastily dialed the phone.

“Normally, the machine gets very hot, and this heat dehydrates the husks. The heat evaporates the water, or moisture, in the husks, which dries them out,” his sister explained. “That’s a physical change. The heat also causes chemical changes in the husks. For example, it turns them from green to yellow. ”

“*Y ahora qué,*” exclaimed his father in Spanish as he hung up the phone. “The mechanic can’t fix it until the parts become available, but the parts won’t be available until the end of next month. Without this machine, we won’t be able to dry all the husks we need for the festival.”



“Of course we can,” Tomás’s mother announced, throwing a kitchen towel over her shoulder. “We’ll just have to do it the old-fashioned way, the way our family used to do in Mexico when they didn’t have a dehydrating machine. We’ll dry them in the sun.”

“Can the sun dry corn husks?” asked Tomás.

“Indeed, it can,” his mother answered. “The heat from the sun can evaporate moisture just as well as the machine. It’ll just take more time and more work.”



The Old-Fashioned Way

“So, we *will* be able to take part in this year’s festival,” said their mother as they gathered around the kitchen table, “but we’ll have to work a lot harder to get ready.”

“Let’s start right now,” Sofía responded immediately. Tomás followed his family to the work area, annoyed. *Why is she always so happy to work on the family business? When am I going to have time to work on my photographs?*

“How long will this take?” he asked. “I have a lot of work to do to get my photographs ready in time for the exhibit.”

“What’s more important?” his sister demanded. “Finishing your exhibit or helping the family?”

“Easy for you to say,” Tomás fired back. “You don’t know how much I have to do. And you don’t have your life’s work going up at the festival exhibit this year.” He hated when she tried to make him feel guilty. But he knew what was coming. She would give her whole nagging talk about how their family’s business was more important than his silly hobbies. He clenched his jaw and braced himself for her usual annoying speech.

“It wouldn’t matter if I did,” Sofía argued. “Family is more important than your silly hobbies. Mom and Dad have worked hard to build this business. Now they need a little extra help from you, and you’re going to say *no*?”

“I didn’t say *no*,” Tomás corrected her. “All I’m saying is, I’m not sure I can help out and finish my work for the exhibit. I have to organize the pictures, mount them, label them, and then come up with a title or a name for my photo presentation, which might be the hardest part of all.”

“That is a lot of work,” Sofía agreed, “but I still say family comes first.”

“Fine, let’s just get started,” Tomás grumbled. *The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get back to my photographs*, he decided.



Tomás and Sofía caught up to their parents and entered the work area. “To begin, we have to put the husks in boxes,” their mother told them. Eager to get the job done fast, Tomás grabbed an armful of husks and dropped them into a box.

“Hold on,” his father stopped him. “You have to place the husks in carefully—a single layer lining the bottom of each box, and every box has to be **ventilated**. It has to allow air in and out so that the husks dry properly.”

The family spent the rest of the morning working, and when they were finally done, Tomás headed for his room to work on his exhibit.

“We’re not finished yet,” his mother called out to him. “We have to cover each box with a thin cloth that will keep insects and animals out but let air in.”

Tomás sighed as Sofía handed him the first piece of cloth—there were dozens of boxes.



The Pérezes lived in Mullen, Nebraska, where the average temperature in August was about 30 degrees Celsius (87 degrees Fahrenheit). The weather had been hotter than usual, so there would be plenty of heat to dry the husks in the sunny yard.

“Heat isn’t our only concern,” their mother told Sofía as they covered the last box with cloth and set it outside. “The **humidity** has to be below 60 percent or **moisture** in the air might cause mold to grow on the husks. Luckily, it hasn’t rained in weeks, and there’s very low humidity right now.”

“Well, that’s one good thing. Now can I work on my exhibit?” Tomás asked.

