

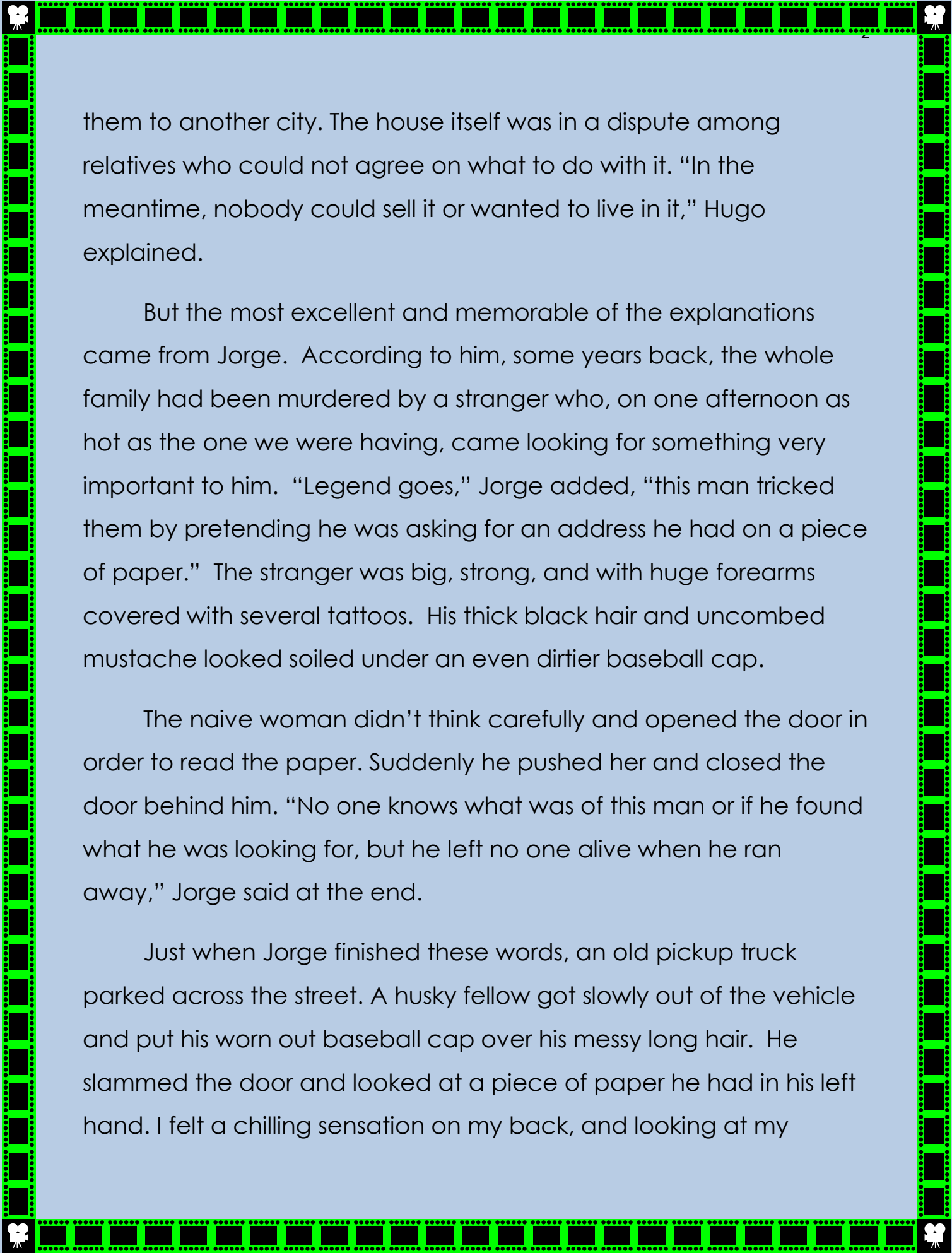
The Mysterious House

By Sergio Flores

That scorching afternoon in July felt hotter after a couple of street soccer games. As usual, we all were resting in the open garage of the Mysterious House, as we had nicknamed it. Nobody remembered when the people who lived in the mysterious house had left it for good; it was just a faded memory for us. Nor anyone remembered any person coming to see it. But we didn't care at all about those details. The important thing was that the open garage was ours. We were going into sixth grade in September, and we had used the dirty garage for about three summers already. Now and then, with sinister curiosity we would peek through the windows to confirm that all the furniture was still there untouched. We never tried breaking into the house, though; after all we all believe it had some sort of curse.

After the routinely series of jokes, the conversation turned unusually serious. Jaime suggested that the whole family had died in an accident, and with no relatives alive to claim the property, the house would be uninhabited for a long time, "because the law says so," he informed us.

Hugo, the most imaginative of them all, tried to convince us that the father had gone mad and killed the mother. The children had been taken by the closest relatives who thought it would be better to take



them to another city. The house itself was in a dispute among relatives who could not agree on what to do with it. "In the meantime, nobody could sell it or wanted to live in it," Hugo explained.

But the most excellent and memorable of the explanations came from Jorge. According to him, some years back, the whole family had been murdered by a stranger who, on one afternoon as hot as the one we were having, came looking for something very important to him. "Legend goes," Jorge added, "this man tricked them by pretending he was asking for an address he had on a piece of paper." The stranger was big, strong, and with huge forearms covered with several tattoos. His thick black hair and uncombed mustache looked soiled under an even dirtier baseball cap.

The naive woman didn't think carefully and opened the door in order to read the paper. Suddenly he pushed her and closed the door behind him. "No one knows what was of this man or if he found what he was looking for, but he left no one alive when he ran away," Jorge said at the end.

Just when Jorge finished these words, an old pickup truck parked across the street. A husky fellow got slowly out of the vehicle and put his worn out baseball cap over his messy long hair. He slammed the door and looked at a piece of paper he had in his left hand. I felt a chilling sensation on my back, and looking at my

friends' pale faces didn't reassure me. A nervous silence anticipated the next move of the stranger. When he lifted his eyes he stared at the house, attentively, as if he was looking for something. In a quiet instant we all were standing. The man dashed across the street toward us, talking and waving the paper.

Nobody cared about anybody when the feared reached the highest point. As wild animals chased by their predators, each one of us jumped, darted, scurried, or ran away from without looking back. I didn't stop until I got home. All the time, my heart pounding my chest, my sweat coming down as if I had taken a shower, my legs shaking, and my mouth dry as dust. The rest of the afternoon I didn't say a word to anyone in my family about what happened. What would you have done?

