

Tale of a Girl

by

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This book is dedicated to my mom, Dorothy, my Grandma Flossie and Grandpa Ralph, and my high school English teacher, Mr. Newton

## Chapter One

“Hurry up, Silvia. They’re right behind us!”

I grabbed the hand of my classmate and dragged her down the street away from the four girls who were taunting her. By their height they looked like sixth graders.

“Wetback!” they shouted. “Go back home where you came from!”

I didn’t know what a wetback was and I didn’t know where Silvia came from. But I could hear them throwing rocks at us. They probably picked them up at the lot down the street where they were rebuilding that house.

We were almost at my house, which was only four blocks from our elementary school on Newlin Avenue. Four long blocks. I pulled Silvia—without looking— across the last intersection, and a horn honked and we screamed and jumped. We halted and then scurried in front of the car to the other side of the street. Her tennis shoe almost fell off when she reached the curb. It was faded red and looked much too big for her.

“Oh!” she squealed, as she looked down at the back of her leg and saw blood drawn from a rock they had thrown. She was half crying half shrieking, with the car having just missed us and the girls chasing her. But I kept pulling her and we bolted ahead.

We reached my house, with the girls close on our tails. I took Silvia around the outside of the rose garden, across the front yard of the little house in back of us where Mrs. Rischer used to live, and then through our back yard and up the back porch steps. I didn’t want those girls to see me go in the front door and know where I lived.

“A donde vamos?” Silvia panted.

I think she was asking where we were going. “C’mon. This is my house,” I said. We sat on the back porch steps, catching our breath.

Thinking about ‘wetback,’ I asked her, “Where are you from, anyway?”

Her face looked a bit puzzled. “Mexico,” she answered.

I knew ‘wetback’ had to be a mean name. I glanced at her back. It looked dry to me. “You wanna come in and wash that?” I pointed to her bleeding leg.

“No. No.” She wiped her tear stained face with the back of her sleeve. “I—I have to go home. Mama wants me to sit with Teresa.”

I couldn’t imagine a fourth grader babysitting a younger child. Maybe the kids weren’t home alone.

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s see if they’re gone.” We adjusted our book bags and stole around the other side of the house, hiding behind the large concrete block which held up the front porch post of the frame house. The concrete columns were so big you could hide behind them, which we did sometimes when we played hide and seek in the summer evenings. Then we ran over to the side bushes in the front yard. Off in the distance, past Pickering Avenue, were four figures meandering down the sidewalk. *Whew!*

“Bueno,” Silvia said. “Hasta mañana,” she mumbled.

“Silvia,” I stopped her. I had a feeling this might happen again. “Meet me outside of room eight after school tomorrow, entiende? We’ll walk home together and keep an eye out for them.”

She nodded, said “Bueno,” and hurried down the street. I knew it wasn’t far to her house.

I don’t know when I learned these Spanish words. I guess since we have had more Mexican kids at our school now, I’ve picked them up. I returned to the back porch, gathered up my book bag and lunch box and started in the back screen door.

Grandma was in the warm kitchen. She was propped against the sink, peeling potatoes, her round middle covered with the apron of faded yellow daisies. Her fine white curly hair was pulled back off of her sweating forehead with bobby pins. She looked at me in surprise. “Why the back way, Mary Ruth?”

I paused. “It’s a long story, Grandma.”

“I was just going to put some cookies in the oven. I saved you the bowl to lick. Come tell me about school today.”

She put the cookies in the oven, and wiped her hands on her apron. Then she brought the potatoes and a bowl for peelings into the dining room and sat down at the round dining room table covered in a plastic flowered table cloth. She continued to peel potatoes. I sat down with the bowl that had held the chocolate chip cookie dough. In between licks, I told her about the girls who had chased Silvia and me, name-calling and throwing rocks at us.

“That’s awful!” said my grandmother. She tapped the end of the potato peeler against the table. “Mary Ruth, I have told you this before. You must speak up! When you hear someone name calling, you ask them how they would feel if someone called them a name like that,” she instructed me. Grandma was raised a Quaker and we all went to the First Friends Church. Grandma always tried to solve a problem in a nonviolent way. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn’t.

I shook my head and clenched my jaw. "I did speak up this time, Grandma! I tried to talk to them but they wouldn't listen. They just kept shouting at her and chased her down the street. I was behind them, so I caught up with her and then we hurried home."

As I told Grandma what had happened, I thought about what I had said to those girls. I shocked myself. I've always been shy, and I've stayed out of trouble.

"What's her name, honey?" she asked me.

"Silvia. Silvia Morales, I think. She's in my class. She just moved here from Mexico. She doesn't have any friends, yet. She talks to her brother during recess. In Spanish. But she doesn't know English very well. I don't think she learned any in Mexico."

"Maybe you could invite her home after school sometime. For ice cream?" To Grandma, there was no problem too big for ice cream.

"Can I?" I was hopeful now.

"Sure. Does she live close?" She took the potatoes and the bowl into the kitchen and washed her hands.

"I think so. She said she lives in back of Jerry's Creamery on Pickering."

"That's not far. You could walk her home afterwards."

A slow smile of gratitude crept across my face. "Okay."

Grandma was good at solutions. I remembered when I was in first grade, Grandma walked me to and from my school. I had a rough first year. Mom worked her "split shifts" which meant she was often gone from eight to twelve noon, back home from noon to four, and then back to work from four until eight. So Grandma was there for me in the afternoon and evening.

On the first day of school, my teacher put me in the closet for talking, and my mom had a fit and bawled her out. So I didn't want to go back to school, and was always trying to escape when Mrs. Simmons was in a nasty mood. In the days that followed, Grandma would have a surprise for me when I made it through a full day of school without running home at recess, like a pencil box, or paper dolls, or a new coloring book.

My thought shifted to those mean girls. "What's a wetback, Grandma?"

"Oh honey," she said, coming back into the dining room. She pulled the ironing board and iron out of the hall closet around the corner, and set it up next to the buffet that held dishes and knick knacks. Then she grabbed a laundry basket full of sheets off the floor and set it on a dining room chair. Grandma never stopped working while she talked.

She placed the iron on top of the board, turned it on, and then sat down next to me again. "It's an insulting name that people who don't know any better call Mexicans. You know,

people who have come from Mexico to live here? It started out when people crossed the Rio Grande River from Mexico into Texas and got wet. They were referring to their 'wet backs.' Now it's just used as a cruel name to call any Mexican."

"What's wrong with Mexicans?" I asked.

"Well, now, that's the sixty four thousand dollar question, isn't it?" she responded, referring to the new quiz show that had arrived last spring and had everyone sitting in front of their TV sets late on Tuesday nights. Grandpa Garl even let my brother John and I watch it, instead of going to bed right after Red Skelton. The contestants were asked questions for prize money, which grew larger as the questions became increasingly harder. The top winner made it to the top question for \$64,000.

She waited for me to say something. Then she said, "People fear what they don't understand. If they don't understand people who are different than them, instead of getting to know them, they push them away."

"Hmmm." I thought about this, tapping my fingers on the table. Finally, I said, "That's stupid. I like her. She's really good at jump rope. Even if she can't speak a lot of English."

"Well..." Grandma drawled, to let me know the conversation was not over. She picked a shirt out of the basket, lay it over the ironing board, sprayed some of that wonderful clean-smelling starch on it, and started in on the sleeves. "You just keep on lookin' for the good things in her, Mary Ruth. That's my girl," she said, tousling my almost white thin blond head of straight hair. My family called me a "towhead." But not to my face (or so they thought).

I went to my room—the one I shared with my mom. Grandma and Grandpa shared the back bedroom. My older brother had the front "den." I wanted his room, because it has windows that look out on the front porch and you could see anyone coming to the house. But mom said it was better for us girls to share a bed.

"Are you doing your homework?" Grandma called out.

"Yes," I replied. Thank goodness there was no arithmetic homework. I would need Grandpa for that. "When is Mom getting off work?" I asked.

"I think her shift ends at six. It'll be dark by then, so I don't think you should walk down to meet her tonight."

My mom worked for the telephone company just down the street at the end of our block, supervising the women on the switchboard. If she worked a day shift, sometimes I would go down and we would walk home together.

"What's for dinner?" I called out.

"Chipped beef on toast," Grandma replied.

Mmmm. One of my favorites. Just then I heard the front door open and shut. My eleven-year-old brother.

“Hi Johnny,” Grandma said.

“Hi,” he replied. Then he saw my head peeking out my bedroom door.

“Hey,” he called. He tossed his book bag over the arm of the living room couch and walked toward me. “Did you go home with that Morales kid?” It was a not-so-pleased tone of voice.

“Yeah, how did you know?” I asked.

“I was out on the playground when you left. You should stay away from those kids. Her older brother is always trying to pick a fight. He’s been suspended twice already.”

My brother was bossy. He thought he knew everything. “These girls were picking on Silvia,” I told him, “Throwing rocks at her and calling her names.”

“Oh,” he said, and stopped and thought for a moment. Then he said, “Just tell the principal. Don’t get involved with her or him or any of them.” By this time my Grandma had stepped into the dining room, bordering my bedroom, and stood listening, holding a can of corn.

My brother continued, “Salvador skips school all the time. I think he works. He gets in fights all the time too.” He splayed his hands out wide to stretch and then relaxed them. “I don’t know where he lives. I was supposed to work on a project with him and I asked him where he lived and he kept saying ‘Oh, we’re moving,’ until I finally got Mr. Fogel to let me do the work by myself,” he said, throwing up his hands in an ‘I give up’ gesture. “Just try and avoid them, Mary Ruth. They’re losers.” He started toward his room.

“Jonathan Edward, hold up there just a minute,” my Grandma stepped in.

He stopped and turned around.

“I don’t like you calling a whole family ‘losers.’” She pronounced. “Every family has struggles. How would you feel if someone called you a ‘loser’ because you live with your grandparents, in a family without a dad?”

“That’s different!” His voice was raised, the tone deepened.

“You might think so. But for some people, it’s a reason to pick on you, and that is not right. You think about that. Now go wash up for dinner. We’ll eat when your mom gets home at six-thirty.”

My brother glowered, cracked his knuckles, and took off for the smaller washroom between my grandparents’ bedroom and the back porch.

“Use the front bathroom, John. You know that one’s for Grandpa.” Grandpa’s washroom was nasty. It smelled like Boraxo, this icky white gritty hand soap that he used to get grease off of his hands. *Phew!*

He turned around, snatched up his book bag and went to his room in the front of the house.

I just looked at her. I didn’t smile outwardly, but I was smiling inside. *You tell him, Grandma!*

The back screen door slammed shut and Grandpa Garl detoured from his usual stop in the bathroom, and huffed into the kitchen. He stood there, rubbing the back of his neck, which he did when he was frustrated.

Grandma had just put the ironing board away and walked back into the kitchen.

“Whatsamatter, Garl?” she asked.

Grandpa heaved a big sigh. He wore khaki pants and a khaki shirt, both covered in grease, as were his hands. He held his hands up in the air. “What am I supposed to do?” he gruffed.

“About what?” she asked him.

“We got this new guy workin’ with us now. Mr. Gilbert wants me to find ways for him to help me. But he doesn’t even speak English! What am I supposed to do with him?” He ran his greasy hands through his thinning grey hair.

“Can’t he help you load lumber? What kind of work has he done?” she asked, running dishwater into the sink.

“How do I know? They had to lay him off at Jerry’s Creamery. An ice cream store, Ginny. He’s worked at an ice cream store.”

Ginny was my Grandpa’s name for Grandma Bessie. She hated her name, so he gave her a nickname.

Then I remembered Silvia saying her dad worked at the creamery. “What’s his name?” I asked Grandpa.

“Mary Ruth, if you want to talk to me, get in here. I can’t hear you,” Grandpa Garl ordered from the kitchen.

I went in. “What’s his name?” I asked again.

“Ricardo,” he answered. “Ricardo Morales, I think. Why?” He looked at me, raising his eyebrows.

*I don't want to upset Grandpa*, I thought. "Oh nothing," I said and walked out. I sat back down in the dining room. *I wonder if that's Silvia's dad.*

He turned to Grandma. "What's gotten into her?"

"Oh, she's had a hard day," I heard Grandma say.

"You know how Mr. Gilbert is about people who are down on their luck," Grandpa Garl continued. "This guy came into the church, and a course Mr. Gilbert's there half the time, fixin' somethin' and before ya know it he's got this guy a job. With me!"

Grandma stopped doing dishes and turned around and faced her husband. "Garl, if Neil Gilbert hadn't set you up with his construction business when we first came to Whittier in 1948, where would we be?"

I saw Grandpa look down at the floor.

"We would have been homeless, Garl. Doris hadn't started working yet at the phone company. And when our friend Frank had to go to Korea, his wife lived in that little house out back of us until she found a place in San Diego."

His posture was beginning to crumple under her scrutiny.

"Neil Gilbert put our friend up for free, Garl. He offered us this house, and we're still livin' in this one today. We have two people workin' in this family and two grandchildren goin' to school right down the street." She leaned over to try and make him look her in the eyes. "We're doin' pretty good. And we owe it to Mr. Gilbert."

Slowly he raised his head up and nodded.

"I'm sure there are ways this fellow can help you. You just get with Mary Ruth. Help her with her math and she'll help you with some Spanish."

"She's takin' Spanish?" he asked.

"No, but she's learning it. Now go wash up. Run some soap through that greasy hair. You smell like an old shoe."

He grimaced at her, turned around and went to his back bathroom off the kitchen and the back porch.

Then Grandma peered at me still sitting at the table. "You still here, child?"

"Yeah Grandma. I mean, sorry. I'll go wash up. I didn't mean to listen in." I looked at her and she looked at me and we both knew that's exactly what I meant to do.

