

Las Moras de San Juan

The *juez* introduced the children to the kin they had never met. He told José, “Your *tíos* are going to take you home with them.”

“What about Rosa?”

The judge looked away. Rosa stared at him. She sat on a tattered loveseat holding onto her brother’s hand, her *Negríta* pressed close to her breast. The rag doll was stained black by the dust from the coal mine that killed her daddy. The child shifted her attention to the others. Her Aunt Alicia averted her face. Her uncle stood with his arms crossed. The sullen man met her gaze, then quickly glanced at the curtained window. Rosa looked at her brother whose face was tight with worry.

“What about my sister?” José repeated.

“She can’t come!” their uncle said. “We have no room! No room for you, either!”

His tone softened. “But we can make room for one. Only one,” he said, wiping the lingering hope off the uplifted faces of his wife and the judge.

“I won’t go then. My sister and I are staying together.”

Mr. Armijo didn’t reply, but his manner suggested the boy’s decision was fine with him. Rosa buried her face in her brother’s chest.

“What’s one more?” Alicia asked.

Mr. Armijo glared at his wife, then grimaced. “No!” he said. He stomped to the door and slammed it shut behind him.

The judge sighed. Pointing to the door with his chin, he quietly told Alicia, “Thank you for getting him to take the boy.” He motioned for her to follow into an adjoining room whose thick adobe walls would keep their voices from the children. Closing the door, he said, “I know how hard it is to be charitable these days. You already have a large family. *Díos* will reward you for your kindness.”

“It’s only a small sacrifice. I’m sorry I couldn’t get him to take them both.” Alicia paused, then asked, “What’s going to happen to Rosa?”

“I can’t find her father’s family. No one knows them. Are you sure you don’t know any of his relatives?”

“Like I said before, I hardly knew Vidal. The only time I met him was when he married my sister.” Alicia pinned back a strand of hair that had fallen loose. “They moved around a lot. Followed the work. I never saw Leonor again.” She blanched. “We, we wrote to each other, though. All she told me was that Vidal ran away from home when he was just a boy. He has no family that I know of.”

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The judge walked to a large window that looked out onto the main street of Mora, the seat of the county of the same name. The settlers of this rugged land abutting the *Sangre de Cristo* Mountains of northern New Mexico named the area after the mulberries that grew alongside the waterways. They called the fruit *Las Moras de San Juan* after the apostle Jesus entrusted to care for his mother.

“I’ll find a home for the girl, but not here,” the judge said. “I’ve even asked the ranchers who come to town if they’d take her.” The *juez* clasped his hands behind his back. “It’ll be hard finding a suitable home for the child. One that’s willing to add to their burden during these hard times, but I’ll do what I can. I’ll go to Vegas.” Las Vegas, thirty miles southwest of Mora, was a bustling town of ten thousand.

Alicia nodded. “Is, is it true that Leonor killed herself because she got herself pregnant from a married man?”

“That’s just gossip, *señora*. She took too many sleeping pills. Best leave it at that.” The *juez* paused, then continued. “Your sister had no job. She was a widow with two small children. Don’t judge her too harshly.”

The next day, the Armijos picked José up at school. They took him to their ranch near Anton Chico. Two weeks later, Rosa was given to strangers.

The fat old woman gently tried to pry the rag doll from Rosa’s hands. The little girl clutched her *Negrita* close, refusing to loosen her hold.

Gilberto held out a shiny new doll saying, “Do you want to trade?” Rosa stood mute, her expression blank. The old man looked toward his sister and shrugged.

Dominguita tugged at the doll. Rosa pulled free and ran to the far end of the cluttered

sala. She stood, her back against a wall, in the living quarters above a store.

“*Qué muchachita!*” Dominguita said, exasperation evident in her voice. The sight of the filthy doll was an affront to her penchant for cleanliness.

“Why don’t you let her keep it?” her brother asked.

“But it’s so dirty.”

While the two talked, Rosa went in her pants.

“Oh, my!” Dominguita said when her fastidious nose recognized the offending odor.

While Dominguita kept muttering “Oh, my!” Gilberto’s gaze shifted back and forth between the vacant-faced little girl and his hysterical sister. *No one would ... She, she wouldn’t do this unless she’s sick ... or really hurting.*

“Oh, my! Oh, my!”

“*Hermanita*, why don’t you go downstairs and get Rosa some clothes. I’ll see to her.”

“Oh, my! Oh ... oh, okay. Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“*No te preocupes, ‘manita*. I can handle it.”

As Dominguita ambled down the stairs, Gilberto fetched a tub and filled it with water. After filling a *platón* and setting it on a wood-burning stove to warm, he went to Rosa. Getting down on his knees, he hugged her saying, “It’s all right. It’s all right.” Rosa let the old man undress her.

Dominguita trudged back up the stairs just as Gilberto was rinsing the soap from Rosa’s hair. The woman stood on the landing holding onto an armful of clothes. She waited awhile and watched as her brother bathed the dark-haired girl, then she walked to the kitchen table and put the clothes on the tabletop. She sat in her rocking chair. When

she set the rocker into motion, Gilberto asked Rosa if she wanted him to bathe her baby.

The child handed him her *Negríta*.

This antique brother and sister were long past the age when people married. They had given up on the prospect of marriage, but they were intrigued by the *juez*' plea to care for an orphan. When the judge told them Rosa's mother had killed herself, they pitied the child. So after deliberating between themselves, they decided they wanted the chance to experience parenthood, and they accepted the judge's proposition.

Gilberto lifted Rosa from the tub, wrapped her in a towel, and carried the dripping child to the rocking chair. Humming a redundant tune, Dominguita patted Rosa dry, then toweled her hair. Following her brother's example, she offered to dry the girl's doll as well. After dressing Rosa, she said, "My, my. Aren't you pretty."

"Lovely, just lovely," Gilberto said, "but wouldn't she look even prettier if you fixed her hair?"

"Yes. Yes, you're right, *'manito*."

Dominguita went to her bedroom, returning with a comb, brush, and mirror. Handing Rosa the mirror, she sat on the rocking chair and proceeded to comb Rosa's hair, pausing occasionally to comment on the girl's beautiful ebony eyes, the weather, or whatever struck her fancy. At first, Dominguita respectfully waited for a response from the child, but when none came, she continued to talk to her as if she was carrying on a conversation. "What would you like to eat, Rosa? ... *Costillas* or *Carne adovada*? ... *Costillas* sounds good to me, too. *Que quieres, 'manito*?"

"Huh, what did you say?" Gilberto asked, caught off guard. If his sister hadn't turned to face him, he never would have known she was speaking to him.

“Are *costillas* okay with you?”

“Yes. Yes, *costillas* are fine.” The bell hanging above the door downstairs jingled. “I better see what they want.” Gilberto wove his way around the crowded furniture on his way to the stairs. “*Horita te miro, ‘manita ... Rosa. Got to get back to work.*”

“Bring back a spool of black thread,” Dominguita said. “I’d like to sew her doll before the stuffing comes out.”

“Sure. Anything else?”

“No, that’s all.”

“Would you like some rock candy, Rosa?” Gilberto stood on the landing awaiting an answer that didn’t come. Uneasy moments passed before he descended the stairs.

Rosa didn’t utter a word for months. She let drop the toys the eccentric couple placed in her hands. She sometimes refused to eat, and as spring and summer passed, she carried her *Negrita* everywhere. One day as the trees on the banks of the *Gallinas* River dressed in their fall colors, Rosa angrily threw her *Negrita* down and kicked it across the floor. She chased after her doll, and grunting, kicked it again.

Dominguita turned away from the cutting board where she was slicing vegetables for the stew she was preparing. She went to see what Rosa was doing.

“Ugh!” Rosa’s vicious kick sent the rag doll sliding underneath the sofa.

“Rosa! That’s no way to treat your baby! What’s wrong, *linda mía*?”

Rosa’s face was red with anger, her dark eyes flashing.

“What’s the matter, Rosa?” Dominguita shuffled toward the couch. Getting on her hands and knees, the woman reached under the sofa, exposing her broad behind to the

child. Retrieving the doll, she labored to get back on her feet. She brushed off Rosa's *Negruta* and offered it to her.

Rosa slapped the doll out of her hand and began screaming.

"Rosa! Rosa! What's wrong?"

Rosa started running around the crowded room, knocking knickknacks off the table tops. Dominguita hurried to stop her, but the child was too quick, darting her way between the cramped furnishings like a minnow eluding a bigger fish. Hearing the commotion overhead, Gilberto rushed up the stairs. When he got to the top, Rosa grabbed a music box and smashed it on the floor.

Gilberto caught Rosa just as she was about to break one of the glass figurines his sister had spent years collecting. He let her go when she bit his hand. Dominguita grabbed Rosa before she could get away. Holding the little girl close, the woman surveyed the wreckage. Rosa kicked and screamed, but Dominguita held her tight. Shaking his head, Gilberto started to pick up and put back the thrown objects. After a while, Rosa stopped her tantrum and began to cry.

"Why did you do this?" Dominguita said more to herself than to the child. The woman's eyes teemed with tears when she saw Gilberto pick up the broken music box, a gift a *novio* had given to her. "Oh, well," she said, lamenting the lost chance at marriage more than the broken momento. She wiped her tears with the hem of her apron, then she stroked the child's head. "Everything will be all right."

Later that evening, Gilberto read while Dominguita crocheted. Rosa yawned and got off the floor where she was playing with the new doll Gilberto had given her. The old man

had put her *Negruta* away when she didn't seem to want it anymore. She accepted the new doll without any show of emotion. Rosa walked to Dominguita and wormed her way onto the woman's lap, snuggling close to her ample bosom.

Dominguita dropped her crocheting to the floor and set the rocker into motion. She hummed, then she smiled as a deeply satisfying feeling filled her heart. A few minutes later, Rosa was asleep. After Gilberto put her to bed, brother and sister talked.

"I wonder what got into her," Gilberto said.

"God knows what goes on in that little girl's head. I can't imagine what I'd do in her place. I don't know what's worse, not being able to see her *papá* again because he's buried in some mine or finding her *mamá's* body." Dominguita picked her crocheting off the floor. "And then her brother's taken from her. Poor child."

"And what about her doll? She never let that raggedy thing out of her sight, and now she won't even touch it."

"Who knows?" Dominguita shook her head. "Sometimes I think we made a mistake."

"Things will get better."

"When? Sometimes I doubt if things will ever get any better."

"They will, *manita*. We just have to give it some time."

"*Cuanto más?*"

On a chilly morning, Gilberto put a sign out to indicate the store was closed. He locked the door, then offered Rosa his hand and she took it. Dominguita accompanied them, and they went west of the *Plaza* down *Valencia* Street one block until they stood in

front of Our Lady of Sorrows. Rosa looked at the red sandstone walls of the church, its twin bell towers rising higher than its steep pitched roof, the rock taken from a quarry less than a mile from where her brother now lived.

As Rosa mounted the steps to the church, she studied the arched windows on either side of the doors and on the towers. After lashing out at her parents for dying, the anger that welled up subsided enough so she could focus on her surroundings. As she dwelt less on what she had lost, she noticed what she had overlooked, the random pattern of how the building's blocks were laid, the variety of their pecked surfaces. She squeezed Gilberto's hand, then shyly looked away when he glanced down at her.

After they entered the church, Dominguita trudged toward the altar where she would place the embroidered altar cloth she had laundered and pressed. Gilberto proceeded for the closet behind the sacristy where the brooms were kept. Rosa climbed the stairs at the rear of the church, so she could examine the huge pipe organ in the loft.

While Dominguita and Gilberto cleaned and swept, Rosa stood at the console and pressed down on the keys of the organ. No notes escaped because no assistant pumped air into the reservoir. On Sundays, the organist made strange and lovely music by directing the pumped air to the wind chest and into the pipes. Rosa fingered the keyboards and tinkered with the draw knobs and tabs. She sat on the bench and stretched a foot to touch the long pedal board.

When the organ no longer entertained her, she descended the stairs. Rosa had grown familiar with the church just as she had gotten used to the curious couple who cared for her. She came here often. She came when they cleaned and when they worshiped, and she accompanied Dominguita when the woman wanted to pray. When Rosa got tired, she

made herself at home and lay on a pew and slept. Likewise, the parishioners no longer called her *muda* like the mutes who visited peoples' homes at Christmastime; bogeymen dancing and leaping grotesquely with bags over their heads, scaring kids by soundlessly lunging at them, much to the delight of their parents.

Rosa sometimes wandered the aisles of the church. She visited the statues of saints standing on their pedestals or hidden in their niches along the walls. When Rosa came down the creaking steps, she walked to the plaster imitation of Michelangelo's *Pietà* in the nave just right of the altar. She saw the mother of God gazing down at the corpse of Jesus sprawled on her lap. Rosa stared at her. Knowing death more profoundly than her peers, she noticed the absence of pain on Mary's face. Instead, Mary looked serene and buried in thought. Precocious as she was, Rosa didn't realize that Jesus' mother had not yet felt the pain of separation. She was still caring for her son. Rosa stayed there a long time, and her gaze never broke until Gilberto put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's time to go, *mi'ja*."

Rosa took his hand and they started for home. When they got to the store, Gilberto unlocked the door and went inside. Rosa followed Dominguita to the chicken coop. She watched her talk to the hens. Not the "clucking" sound made by the curling slap of the tongue on the roof of the mouth behind the teeth. Not the "Here, chick-chick" that people call when feeding chickens, but "Where'd you hide your egg, Sinferosa?" A grin snuck onto Rosa's lips. The smile burst onto the rest of her face when Dominguita wagged her finger and warned the hold-out hen, "If you don't give me an egg by Saturday, you'll be Sunday's supper."

Through with the day's collection, Rosa fastened the gate to the coop and followed

Dominguita once again.

“Remind me to have Gilberto cut some kindling. I’d like to bake some bread.”

The woman kept up the running chatter until they were well inside the store.

That afternoon, while washing dishes, Dominguita peered out the second floor window and watched the leaves scud along the ground as the fall breeze rose and fell. She saw how a few brittle leaves tenaciously clung to their branches, refusing to yield to the coming winter. She wondered how anyone could willingly give up the precious gift of life when her thoughts were interrupted.

“I’m hungry.”

Startled, Dominguita dropped the dish she was holding into the wash pan. “Did you say something, *linda mía*?”

“I’m hungry.”

Wiping her hands dry on her apron, Dominguita asked, “What would you like to eat?”

“Anything. I’m starving.”

Dominguita waddled to a curtained *dispensa* and came back with a jar she had taken off a shelf. “Would you like some peaches and cream?” The old woman was barely able to contain her elation. She wanted very much to go downstairs and tell her brother.

“I’d like that, thank you.”

“You’re such a polite child.” Dominguita pulled Rosa close and squeezed her tight, then she walked across the room to get the cream.

A while later, Gilberto locked the store and trod up the steps. As he neared the top

of the stairs, he heard Rosa and his sister absorbed in an animated conversation.

Surprised, he stopped to listen. Rosa was talking nonstop like she was unloading all she had stored in her head during her silent time.

“Did you know *hormigas hacen cuentitas?*” she said, alluding to the tiny beads ants made from shards of glass little girls left on their mounds. Before the woman could respond, Rosa begged permission to go through Dominguita’s button box.

After catching his breath, and getting over the shock, Gilberto joined them.

“Would you like some peaches and cream, *‘manito?*”

“Yes, please.”

Rosa started school the following month.

“Children, we have a new student today. I want you to make her feel welcome. Her name is Rosa Velarde.”

Rosa stood next to Mrs. Montoya. The girl looked pretty in her white pinafore with red piping. The red ribbon in her hair made her look like a brown-faced Shirley Temple, but without the sausage curls.

“Hello,” Rosa murmured, recalling Gilberto’s instructions to be courteous towards everyone. She glanced at the sea of faces which intimidated her, so she looked up at the friendly face of her teacher.

Mrs. Montoya pointed to an empty desk, telling her that it would be hers. Uncertain as to what was expected, Rosa remained standing alongside her teacher an awkward moment too long before taking her seat.

The boy behind her snickered. “She’s just a baby. A daddy’s girl.”

“What did you say, Narciso?”

“Nothing, *señora*.”

Rosa flushed and felt herself shrink a bit.

After giving the children their assignment, Mrs. Montoya came to Rosa. She wrote Rosa’s name on top of a sheet of paper. As she drew each of the neat manuscript letters, she named them. When she was done, she directed Rosa to copy her name until the page was filled. When Rosa finished, she ran her fingers along the letters, whispering “Rosa Velarde.” She closed her eyes, hoping her touch would bring back her father. Opening her eyes, she warded off her disappointment and took the paper to her teacher.

“Good. Good. Very nice.” Mrs. Montoya got up from her desk, gave Rosa a quick hug, and called for the youngest children to read.

Rosa opened her book. She struggled to keep up as her classmates read. Instinctively, she knew the empty spaces between the crowded print separated each word. She was relieved when the story ended before it was her turn to read. As one of the girls collected the primers, Rosa refused to give hers back. She didn’t want to return it until she had memorized the words she had learned.

“*Señora*, Rosa won’t give me the book,” Lupe said.

When her teacher took it from her, Rosa wanted to explain why she needed it, but she couldn’t find the words. “*Sí, señora*,” she whispered when Mrs. Montoya told her the book wasn’t hers to keep, but only to use. The children laughed and Rosa withdrew further into herself.

During recess, the girls gathered together. Fingering Rosa’s dress, one of them said, “It’s very pretty. Did your *mamá* make it?”

“No, no she bought it for me,” Rosa said, feeling guilty insinuating she had a mother.

“Let’s play,” another girl said. Another opened a cloth pouch and spilled jacks onto the ground. The girls knelt, forming a circle. Rosa remained standing.

“Aren’t you going to play?” Lupe asked.

“No, not today. I’ll just watch.” Rosa wanted to play, but her dress wasn’t suited for the playground. She didn’t want to risk upsetting Dominguita by getting it dirty.

“Come on. It’s easy. I’ll show you,” Lupe insisted.

Unable to voice her predicament, Rosa shook her head and walked away, retreating further into her shell. By the end of the day, she barely talked. By the end of the week, she didn’t speak at all.

When Dominguita came to school, Mrs. Montoya blamed the children’s meanness for Rosa’s reticence. “You don’t have to go to school if you don’t want to,” was all Dominguita said before thanking Mrs. Montoya and taking Rosa home.

The snow began falling an hour before dawn and finished at ten in the morning. The moisture wiped clean the air, deepening the blueness of the sky. *The snow is thick and heavy with water, enough to quench the earth for many days*, Gilberto thought as he shoveled it off the boardwalk, his ears red from the biting chill. When he was done, he stood the shovel by the door and went inside. He removed his coat and hung it on a peg on the wall next to the counter. After warming himself at a potbellied stove, he walked to the base of the stairs and called for Rosa to join him.

“*Qué quieres, Abuelo?*” Rosa asked when she went to him. *Abuelo* or *Abuela* was the mutually agreed upon name Rosa used to call her adoptive parents. Mother or father

was deemed unacceptable and their given names too familiar.

“It’s time to get you a new coat. You’re growing like a weed and your old one fits you too snug. Let’s try some on and see which one you like.” They walked to where the coats hung and Gilberto selected a luxurious fur-lined one. “Here, try this on.”

“I don’t like it,” Rosa said before he could pull it off its hanger.

“All right. Why don’t you pick one.” Rosa rummaged through the rack. She chose a coat much plainer than his selection. It fit perfectly. “Why this one?” he asked.

“It’s what the girls at school wear.”

“The other one’s much prettier, don’t you think?”

“I want to wear what my friends wear,” Rosa doggedly said. She didn’t tell him the clothes *los viejitos* had her wear were too extravagant for everyday use.

Put off by her newfound conformity, Gilberto said, “You’re prettier and smarter than they are. Would you like to be uglier and stupider than them?”

“Yes.”

Irked, Gilberto snapped, “God made us different, so we wouldn’t be like each other.”

“I don’t like God! He took my parents! Why did he do that?”

It took a while for Gilberto to respond. “I’m sorry, *mi’ja*. God had his own son nailed to a tree. His son told us we had to bear our crosses if we wanted to be with Him in heaven. I don’t know why God does such things or why He made your burden so heavy.”

Rosa paused, trying mightily to understand. “Are my *mamá* and *papá* in heaven?”

“Did they love each other? Did they love you?”

“Yes.”

“Then they’re with God. He expects us to make our own way in the world. Only

He knows when He'll take us." Gilberto cupped the back of Rosa's head and gently brought her close to him. "But my *'manita* and I will be with you until we die if you let us."

Rosa wrapped her arms around his waist and wept. Her sobs gave way to a keening wail, which eventually succumbed to soft whimpers. The old man patiently stood until she could cry no more.

Before the last snowfall, Rosa returned to school. She played with the children and answered all her teacher's questions. She became an adept student and pleaded to go to school even when she was sick.

When Rosa was twelve years old, she bounded up the stairs two at a time. "I'm home," she announced as she flew off the top step. Dominguita and Gilberto were sitting at the table talking to a young man in an ill-fitting suit. He turned to look at her. Rosa instantly recognized her brother. Blubbering, she ran to him. They collided as he got out of his chair. Rosa and José clung to each other, and when their tears were spent, they began to get reacquainted with the awkwardness of strangers.

"You ... you've grown," José said. "How ... How've you been?"

"Let's give them some privacy," Gilberto told Dominguita as he wiped his own tears. The *viejitos* started for the stairs.

"Please stay. I want you to stay," Rosa said. Turning to José, she said, "You must be hungry. I'll fix something to eat."

Dominguita, now humpbacked by osteoporosis, joined Rosa at the stove. Gilberto, hands gnarled by arthritis, filled the wood box. During supper, José told them he wasn't

returning to his *tíos*.

“Why not?” Gilberto asked.

“My *uncle* never wanted me. My *tía*, she ... she was always kind, but ... Anyway, it was time for me to leave.”

“Where will you go?” Dominguita asked.

“Wherever I find work.”

“You’re not going anywhere. We have lots of catching up to do. You’re staying here,” Rosa insisted. “Isn’t that right,” she said, looking toward her *abuelos*.

“You can stay as long as you like,” Dominguita said. Gilberto agreed.

“All right,” José said. “I’ll visit a spell.”

Jobs were scarce and José found no permanent work, so between odd jobs, he helped in the store. He repaired what Gilberto could no longer fix. He cleaned what needed cleaning and painted what needed painting. He took his turn at the counter. He stocked shelves, swept, whatever needed doing. José took to calling *los viejitos Abuelo y Abuela*, and the days without work turned to weeks, the weeks to months, and soon no mention was made of finding a job. He took to managing the store, and by God’s abiding grace, the orphans took good care of the parents who had no children of their own.