

The Cure

First it was Emmanuel, then me. I used to get mad at Mama and Papa for my existence. If only they'd stopped having babies before my brother was born, they would be like other families with four healthy kids. But then I had to forgive them, because how were they to know the fifth and sixth would get sick? Manny seemed fine until he started crawling around, and by then I was already on the way. We were only eleven months apart--his birthday was in January, mine in December. Mama had noticed Manny's skin was strangely delicate, but it was when he got old enough to graze his knee that she realized something was really wrong. Instead of a little bruise or scrape, a huge tense blister would rise like some kind of fluid monster. If it was touched, it would extend hideously, spreading to cover half a leg. Then at some point the blister would pop, gush yellow liquid and bare a raw, red surface that looked like someone had poured boiling water over it. I remember his screams as clearly as if they were my own. When I started to blister too, I remember trying to stay quiet because I felt so sorry for Mama. I sometimes heard her crying when she thought no one was listening. When she brought home my two youngest sisters, she looked more haggard than happy. She feared the worst, but fortune smiled on them.

It wasn't until Manny was six and I was five that we finally got a diagnosis from the doctors: *EB*, which stood for the tongue-twisting *epidermolysis bullosa*. The doctors told Mama and Papa that EB was inherited, and they were each carriers. One gene could sneak by forever unnoticed, and usually did. It was the deadly combination of two genes in one person that produced the disease. As the math worked out, one in four offspring would be affected. We were two out of eight--a textbook case. Turns out our skin was missing a crucial protein. With the slightest rub or scratch, it just slid off. Mama said when she asked the doctor what the cure was, he just shook his head. She also said that was about the time Papa started drinking more.

Medicaid helped us pay the bills. Even so, we never seemed to have enough bandages and ointments. More than once I had wet paper towels wrapped around my legs. The doctor would tell Mama to use medical gauze, but he would never tell her how she was to afford enough to last until the next month. He had kind, tired eyes, and would listen intently when Manny

would ask *Doc, when, when, WHEN are they gonna find the cure?* But he never had an answer, except to say some doctor-like thing about how the latest prescription ointment might work better, or how they were doing research on fixing the bad gene.

Manny and I grew up close. We said we felt each others' pain, and on good days we traded inside jokes. He would say *Velma, I'll give you five bucks for that ugly blister on your left elbow*, and I would laugh and ask where he wanted it. We were jealous of the other kids, because they could run outside and play without fear of ending up in agony. At least until they were fourteen. Mama encouraged us all to finish school, but homework and everything else had to wait until the day's oranges were picked. Or it might be tomatoes or strawberries, depending on the season. As soon as they hit seventeen and sixteen, my oldest two brothers Gabriel and Rafael dropped out and went to Mexico City to work for one of our cousins who reportedly had a used car business. What they said was, they were escaping the fields. We knew they were also escaping Papa's temper. None of us was spared that, although Manny and I felt the whip of his belt much less often than the others.

If there was one bright side to having EB, it was not having to work the groves. Papa made Manny try for awhile. He lasted almost eight weeks, but then he shinnied up a grapefruit tree to get to the highest fruit. He paid for that for weeks, and so did Mama, whose fate was to change the dressings while her son cried. Papa left him alone from then on.

The disease didn't spare us on the inside, either. You can blister inside your mouth and nose, and down your esophagus. Your teeth don't stay put, and you basically end up with raw gums. Normal people never worry about a potato chip, but to us it was a shard of glass. And everything would heal sooner or later, but the scarring...Manny and I reached the point that anything but mushed-up food or liquid would stick halfway down because of that.

Manny and I were both sixteen when he showed up outside my bedroom window at 2:00 one January morning. This was something he did on occasion when he felt frustrated, or wanted to talk to me. He would sneak out and come tap on my window. I would quietly open it and slip

out carefully. My three sisters who shared the room with me slept so soundly, they had no idea we ever did this.

I opened the window and whispered “What’s up?”

“Something cool. Come out, hurry up.”

I eased myself through. It was tricky but not impossible to avoid scraping my arms and legs, because I was so small and thin, and I had practice doing it.

The night was cold and clear, the moon so bright it made the trash in the yard glow like some luminous treasure.

“So what’s the deal?” A shiver passed through me. Florida winters were mild, but tonight there was a chill in the air.

“Listen. I been talking to Gabi--”

“You talked to Gabriel? Oh, Papa’s gonna *freak--*”

“Shh--”

“Geez! Remember how mad he was when Gabi and Rafael ran off? He finds out you’re talking to them, you’re--”

“What? Dead? I wish I was dead right now. *Mira*. Look at me, look at you--”

“No,” I whimpered, “quit it, Manny.”

He slapped a tree trunk.

“Don’t! Your hand...”

“That’s it, Velma, that’s *exactly* it. I’m done with this shit. I turn seventeen next week, and so far my life is like--*nothing*. I’m going to Mexico and work with Gabi. He told me I could probably make out real good...it’ll be so much better over there. Gabi said they might even have a *cure*.”

“Cure. Right, Manny,” I sighed. “Let’s go back in, it’s cold.”

I was turning back toward the window when he grabbed my arm, which instantly raised a small blister. I sucked in a breath, but kept quiet, because I caught a look on my brother’s face. He really meant to run away to Mexico City, and he wanted me to go with him.

“Friday, Velma. I talked to Emilio, over at the Chevron station, and he has a pickup he’s letting me borrow. He wants to deliver the truck to Corpus Christi, Texas...’cause his cousin bought it. He said if I pay for gas, I can drive it there. We can go--I saved up like \$75.”

“*This* Friday?...Texas? And then how do we get to Mexico City? Hitch across the border?”

“Gabi’s gonna work it out. He thinks he can come pick us up.”

A wave of nausea welled up in my chest. I didn’t like this. I trusted Gabi, but I barely knew Emilio. Was he trustworthy? Then if we did get there, what would we do? What would Mama do? She would panic! I couldn’t leave her.

As if to read my thoughts, Manny brought up Mama. “Think about it,” he said, “Ma would never, ever have to worry about us--all the never-ending bandages, ointments, doctors--she could be *free*, Velma.”

I should have said *Free to do what*, but Manny’s last line stopped me cold. The only thing that rang through my mind was *he’s right*. We had caused Mama years and years of misery, and here was a chance to liberate her. And maybe they *did* have a cure for us in Mexico City. They had lots of medical treatments that weren’t available here, everyone said so.

“...Okay,” I whispered, “but what about Mama and Papa? We can’t let them think--”

“I know. We’ll call ’em, I promise. Once they know we’re with Gabi and Rafael, they’ll be all right.”

We climbed back in through the window, and as usual my sisters had never stirred. They would never know anything about this until we were long gone.

The next morning was Wednesday. I spent the whole day thinking about what to pack, and how to conceal it until Friday. I decided just to stuff everything into my bag and hide it under my bed. I didn’t need much anyway. Manny and I exchanged secret signals all day, indicating the plan was a go. We would sneak out Friday morning at 2:00 and pick up the truck at the Chevron station on 56th Street, a mile away. We counted out a total of \$97 between us.

Neither of us had room to pack gauze rolls or ointments, and besides, there was a giddiness in the dream of leaving all that behind. We would be *free* as soon as we crossed that border, free of everything that chained us in our old lives.

Thursday felt like an eternity. When I got home from school I must have glanced at Mama a thousand times. She was busy doing what she did every day, not suspecting tomorrow would be different. I was continually near tears to the point that my sister Teresa asked what was wrong, and Mama wondered if I was in pain.

I fought the urge to tell her everything. “No, it’s okay. Just...those stupid jerks at school calling me names again,” I said, shifting to a familiar subject.

“We talked about just ignoring them, right, Velmacita?” She frowned. “Something else is going on. You’ve been kind of moody the last couple days.”

“No, nothing,”

“Hm. Maybe you’re about to get *la regla*. You are sixteen now.” I had not yet had a menstrual period, but the doctor said I would probably start late due to my nutrition. I looked more like a scrawny twelve-year-old than a mature sixteen.

I said I had homework, and went into the bedroom. I couldn’t bear lying to Mama, and I knew she would start to see through my excuses.

Finally it was midnight, and the house was quiet. I lay awake in my bed until 2:00, then pulled out the duffel bag full of clothes I had hidden beneath my bed. I threw my cell phone in the bag, and put on my coat. I took a last look at my sisters, sleeping as if without a care. *Will I ever see them again?* Some unfathomable emotional vise gripped me. Then I realized it was guilt. *This isn’t me.* How could I be the betrayer of a family who loved and cared for me?

But I can’t let my brother down. In tears, I slid open the window, shoved the duffel through, and slipped out. Manny was out by the road already, motioning me to come. I glanced up at the sky. The moonlight was still bright, but passing in and out of clouds, the light shifting between silver and pitch-dark. Our gravel road had no street lights. I had never thought about it before, but guessed the county must not put them up on unpaved roads.

“Nobody heard you, right?” whispered Manny, his breath steaming in the cold air. January was the coldest month in central Florida, and this was a colder night than most. He pulled on my arm to hurry me up.

“No. I’m scared.” I began to cry again. “What if the truck isn’t there?”

“Velma, I know you’re scared, but trust me. It will be. Emilio wants it delivered--and he also knows we want to get the fuck outta here.”

“Manny!”

“--Shhh, *cállate!*”

“Papa would wash your mouth out with soap, blisters or not.”

“Pa’s not here. You got to quit talking all this *Mama-Papa* stuff. You’re gonna go running back home before you even leave.”

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Fear was beginning to blot out everything else.

When we reached the Chevron station, we saw the truck parked around the side.

“Okay, put your stuff in the back,” said Manny. “And go pee now, ‘cause we’re not stopping every few miles.”

I nodded, and went into the filthy restroom, trying not to touch anything.

We got into the truck. It smelled like cigarettes and strawberries. Manny started it up and turned onto the road toward the interstate. “Gonna drive straight through, so we’ll get to Corpus Christi in like fourteen hours.”

“So Gabi’s gonna meet us? Don’t we need some kind of passport, or something?”

He smiled. “*Inocente*. Don’t sweat it *Velmacita*, I got it planned out. Gabi’s coming to Corpus Christi. Just go to sleep for awhile.”

My sense of unease kept building, and we were less than an hour out. I was feeling itchy. Sometimes the bandages did that, but it might be just that I was jumpy. I dared not scratch anything, because that would cause blisters, and Mama would say--

Mama...she wouldn’t have to say a word, because it was off her shoulders now. The thought comforted me, and I must have drifted off.

I awoke to the sound of breaks squealing, and a stop so sudden I nearly slid from the seat to the floor.

“*Shit!*” said Manny. “Fucking cops.”

There were several parked police cars with flashing lights, and they were stopping every car to check something.

“Why--?”

“Shit. Nothing, forget it...” He was looking around for a way to turn around, but there was none.

We were next in line. I wondered where we were. It was dark, and I wasn’t even sure what time it was. Was it still early morning, or did I sleep all day? I looked for my cell phone to check, but realized it was still in my bag, and that was in the back of the truck. I just wanted to see Gabi and Rafael. Everything would be okay once we were with them.

The cops were at the window; it was a checkpoint looking for drunk drivers. They told Manny to step out of the vehicle. He refused, and started arguing with the cop, and I thought *why is he doing that? He’s not drunk. They always say just cooperate with police.*

The cop said for Manny to get out, or he would be under arrest.

Please, please do what he says.

I was thrown back against the seat as the truck suddenly lurched forward and took off. Manny passed the cop cars and kept going. He had it floored, and I saw the speedometer reach 90. I thought I heard sirens behind us.

“Manny! What are you doing? *Stop*, are you crazy?”

He looked in the rear view mirror, and pounded the steering wheel with his hand. “*Fucking hell--!* Look, Velma, we aren’t just delivering the truck. There’s some shit stowed under the seat. I wasn’t gonna tell you, but if--”

Suddenly the truck hit the median and veered to the right, barreling toward a tree. I screamed, and in an instant Manny brought it to a stop.

Oh my God, Manny, that was close--

But it wasn’t Manny who answered, it was Gabriel. I heard his voice outside the window, and I saw his face. *Gabi!* I opened the door and fell into his arms, sobbing with relief. My head hurt, but I knew we would be safe now. Were we almost to Corpus Christi?

I want to call Mama, I said.

Gabi nodded, *soon*, and led us to his car. He knew a little dirt road that crossed into Mexico that never had border agents on it. We had left everything in the truck, but I was so happy to be with Gabi, I didn’t care. We would be in Mexico City in a few hours. I felt foggy,

but light too, as if I could sail above everything. Manny was sitting in the back seat beside me. He just looked at me and smiled.

Gabi's words broke my reverie. *You two are damn lucky I got there when I did. What the hell did you think you were doing, trying to outrun cops?*

He was speaking Spanish, and I thought we must be in Mexico by now. We kids spoke English most of the time at home because Mama insisted, saying that we were American, not Mexican.

Sorry, Gabi, I whispered. I think Manny was scared...the truck...

Forget it, I took care of it. I'm taking care of you now. Rafael fixed up a nice room for you, okay?

I tried to answer, but my voice felt hoarse, as though I'd been screaming. And my head still hurt. I was so drowsy...

I was lying in a bed. *Weren't we in the car? How did I get here?* It was darkish in the room, as though it were not light yet, but I realized the shades were drawn on the window. As my eyes grew accustomed to the low light, I could see another bed in the room, and Manny was asleep there.

Manny...I whispered. He didn't respond, so I thought it was best to let him sleep.

I got up and peered behind the drawn shade. It was daylight. The tantalizing fragrance of chocolate and cinnamon drifted into the room. I left Manny sleeping and went out to the kitchen. Gabi had made *atole* to drink, and there was some fruit and yogurt, along with some hot buns. I was starving, and it all tasted like ambrosia to me. Nothing hurt as it went down.

Where's Rafael? I asked.

Already at work. It's long days here too, said Gabi, getting up to put dishes in the sink. He was dressed for work. *There's food in the fridge, so just hang out for now, all right?*

After Gabi left, I didn't know what I should do. I went back into the bedroom to see if Manny was awake yet. He was still in bed. I moved closer, and noticed the smell of pungent fruit--not fresh fruit, but rotten, sickly. I recognized it instantly--the stench of infection.

Manny! What's...

He didn't move. I threw back the bedcovers, and looked at his legs. The bandages were completely saturated with green fluid.

Oh God...get up, we have to get you cleaned up--

Nothing.

I began to weep. *Manny, no...*I backed away, falling onto my bed. I looked at my own legs, with their leftover bandages still wrapped around. I didn't feel any pain. My hands shook as I unwrapped my right leg, then the left. They were clean.

No! I heard my own voice as if it were far away. *Manny, you said we would be cured...you lied to me, you took all my blisters. That was only a joke...you can't, you can't really do that!*

I wept until a spasm of choking overtook me. It felt like there was something in my throat.

"Jorge! She's awake." It was Mama's voice.

"*Mama?*" No sound came but an airy whisper. I looked up, and her face came into focus. She looked older than she had the night we left. *When was that?*

"*Si, Velmacita.* Shh-shh. You're in the hospital, in Pensacola. The doctors say you're gonna be all right. Mama and Papa are right here."

"Mama...Manny...he's--"

She didn't say anything. She shook her head almost imperceptibly and leaned over to brush a kiss across my cheek. I could feel the wetness of her tears.

"And Gabi-" I croaked.

"*Ay dios mio...*," sighed Mama. "Gabriel...he filled Emmanuel's head with foolishness."

We'd never made it past the Alabama border. The police had pulled us out of the mangled truck barely breathing, according to Papa. I must be a little stronger than Manny, because I didn't give up.

Later when I asked about Gabi, Papa just looked away. He wouldn't speak Gabi's name, but Mama told me he had never left Mexico City. I wanted so badly to see him, but Papa had forbidden him even to come to Manny's funeral.

My memory is hazy, but it's starting to come back in bits and pieces. I keep seeing Manny in a sort of mirage, but if I try to get closer he fades back to the horizon. Sometimes I hear his voice: He calls out to me--*Velma*--and then *The cure--it will come*.

I thought Manny lied to me, but he didn't. He was right all along, the cure appears in unexpected ways. Sometimes I used to lose hope, but not now. I know I saw my brother Gabriel, and the other day I could swear I smelled chocolate and cinnamon.

Any day now. Any day.