

The Cure

First it was Emmanuel, then me. I've always called him Manny, but you should know his given name, because Mama still calls him Emmanuel when she talks about him.

I used to get angry with Mama and Papa. If only they'd stopped having babies before Manny was born, they could've been like other families with four healthy kids. But then I forgave them. How could they know the fifth and sixth would get sick?

Mama said Manny was fine until he started crawling around, and by then I was already on the way. Mama sometimes says those few months were the happiest in her life, because Manny was a sweet child, and her first *bebida* was coming. She always wanted a daughter, and had the name Velma picked out even before my five brothers were born.

Manny and I were only eleven months apart—his birthday was in January, mine in December. Mama had noticed his skin was delicate, but it wasn't until 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 you touched the blister, it would extend hideously and spread over half his leg. Then the blister would pop, gush yellow liquid and bare a raw, red surface that looked like someone had poured boiling water over it. Manny's screams...I covered my ears to keep from hearing them, but they still come back to haunt me sometimes.

Sometime before my third birthday I started to blister. I remember trying to be brave and not cry because I didn't want to upset Mama. She already cried so much over Manny. I heard her when she thought no one was listening. When she brought home my two youngest sisters she looked so haggard. She feared the worst, but God smiled on them.

Polk County, where Manny and I were born and raised, is a big farming area in the middle of Florida. Papa and my older brothers worked picking fruit, mostly oranges and grapefruit. A lot of our friends moved around, but Papa got a regular job with a group of farmers that let us stay in the same house all year. Nearly every day Mama would cross herself and say a prayer for that blessing, and a special one for us: *Jesús, por favor cure Emmanuel y Velma.*

When Manny was six and I was five 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 out of four of their kids was predicted to get the disease, and sure enough we were two out of eight. Turns out our skin was missing a crucial protein that held it together. With the slightest rub or scratch, it just slid off.

Mama said when she asked the doctor what the cure was, all he did was shake his head. She also said that was about the time Papa started drinking more.

Medicaid helped pay the bills. Even so, it was hard to make ends meet. More than once I showed up at the doctor's with wet paper towels taped around my legs instead of medical gauze. He told Mama to use gauze, but not how she was to afford enough to last until next month. He had tired eyes, and would listen so kindly when Manny asked *Doc, when, when, WHEN are they gonna find the cure?* He never had an answer, except some doctor-like thing about how the latest prescription ointment should work better, or how they were doing research on fixing the bad gene.

Manny and I grew up close. We always said we felt each others' pain, and on good days we traded inside jokes. He'd 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, who could run outside and play without ending up in agony. There was a pool at the park behind the school. On Saturdays I would watch my brothers swim and horse around, cannonballing off the diving board, dunking each other. I had to sit at the side of the pool, on account of open sores not being allowed. Manny never even went down there.

Honestly, the other kids didn't have it all that perfect either. Mama encouraged us to finish school, but play, and even homework, had to wait until the day's oranges were picked. Papa hated laziness, and he made sure we knew it. He always seemed to harass my oldest brother Gabriel the most. When Gabe hit seventeen he dropped out and went to Mexico City to work for our cousin who had a used car business. What he said was, he was escaping the fields. We knew he was also escaping Papa's temper. None of us was spared that, although Manny and I felt the whip of his belt a lot less often than the others.

I was happy for Gabriel, but I missed him. He made the best chocolate *atole* ever, creamy and hot, with lots of cinnamon. Sometimes he would make a special batch just for Manny and me, and then say it was *una taza curativa*—a cup to heal you—and we would savor every drop. We laughed as we “raced” to see who could drink it more slowly. That way the winner still had one more sip in the bottom of the cup while the loser went dry.

If there was a bright side to having EB, it was not having to work the groves. Papa made Manny try for awhile. He lasted almost two months, but then he shinned 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 bloody dressings while her son shook from holding back the moans. Papa left him alone from then on.

The disease didn’t spare us on the inside, either. You blister inside your mouth and nose, and down your throat. Your teeth don’t stay put, and you end up with raw gums. Normal people never worry about a potato chip, but to us it was a shard of glass. Everything would heal sooner or later, but the scarring...we reached a point that anything we swallowed, except mashed-up food or liquid, would stick halfway down.

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 wanted to talk to me with nobody else around. He would sneak out and come tap on my window. I would slide it open and slip out. My two little 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 important. 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 was 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’ve been in touch with Gabe—”

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

“Shh!”

“Geez! Remember how mad he was when Gabriel ran off? He finds out you’re talking to him, 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 Gabe. He was only seventeen when he left, and he’s doing great now. He told me he could get me a job at the car sales lot. Said I could probably make out real good...it’ll be so much better over there. He said they might even have a *cure*. So you’re coming too—you have to, Velma.”

“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, instantly raising 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 was determined for me to go with him.

“No joke, Velma. We’re going on Friday. I talked to my friend 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...because his cousin bought it. He said if I pay for gas, I can drive it there. I saved up like \$75.”

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

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

“But...what if we go with Gabe, and then we can’t get back in? The president doesn’t want us, I heard Papa say—”

“We were *born* here, Velma. If we need to come back, which we won’t, it’s not a problem.”

A wave of nausea welled up in my chest. I didn't like this. I trusted Gabriel, but some guy Manny knew who wanted a pickup taken to Texas? Then if we did get there, what would we do? What would Mama do? She would panic! I couldn't leave her.

Manny read my thoughts. "Think about Ma," he said, "You always get so upset when you see her crying. Now she'll 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 what if they did have a cure for us in Mexico City? They had lots of medical treatments that you couldn't get here, everyone said so.

"...Okay," I finally whispered, "but what about Mama and Papa? We can't let them think—"

"I know, I know. We'll call them, I promise. Once they know we're with Gabe, they'll be all right."

When I climbed back in through the window, as usual the other two were still sound asleep. I looked at my sister Teresa's face a long time before I got back to sleep. Her pink lips were slightly parted, and the moonlight across her eyelashes made long, feathery shadows on her cheeks as she dreamed.

She would never dream that I would be gone by Friday morning.

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

Neither of us had room to pack gauze or ointments, and besides, there was this 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 took forever. When I got home from school I must have glanced at Mama a thousand times. She was busy doing what she did every day, having no idea tomorrow would be

different. When she said her daily prayer of thanks I almost lost it, to the point that Mama asked if I was in pain.

I fought the urge to tell her everything.

“No, it’s okay. Just...those stupid asses at school calling me names again,” I said, shifting to a familiar subject.

“Ah-ah, now who’s name-calling? And we talked about just ignoring them, right, *Velmacita?*” But then she frowned. “Something else is going on. You’ve been kind of moody the last couple days.”

“No, I’m fine, Mama. I am.”

“Hm. Maybe you’re about to get *la regla*. You are sixteen now, some hormones may be kicking in.” I had not yet had a menstrual period, something the doctor said was due to my nutrition. I looked more like a scrawny twelve-year-old than a mature sixteen.

I told her I had homework and went into the bedroom. I couldn’t bear lying to Mama, and besides 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 my bag from under the bed. I threw my cell phone in the bag, and put on my coat. I took a last look at my sleeping sisters. *Will I ever see them again?* A vise gripped my stomach. *This isn’t me. How can I just leave the family who loves and cares 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 moon was still bright, but it was passing in and out of clouds, the light shifting between silver and pitch-dark. Our gravel road had no street lights.

“Nobody heard you, right?” Manny whispered, his breath steaming in the cold air. January was the coldest month in 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’ll be there. Emilio wants it delivered—and he also knows we want to get the fuck out of here.”

“Manny!”

“–Shhh, *cállate!*”

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

“Pa’s not here. You got to quit with all this *Mama-Papa* stuff. You’ll be running back home before you even get past the front yard.”

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. “We’re driving straight through, so we’ll get to Corpus Christi in like fifteen hours.”

“So Gabriel’s going to 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. Gabe’s coming to Corpus Christi. Just go to sleep for awhile.”

My 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 Mama would say–*Mama*...she wouldn’t have to say a word, because it was off her shoulders now. Finally, I could do something for her. The thought comforted me, and I must have drifted off.

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

“*Shit!*” said Manny. “Goddamn cops.”

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

“What–?”

“*Mierda*. Nothing, forget it...” He looked 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 Gabriel. Everything would be okay once we were with him.

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.

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 95. 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 going to 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 we slammed to a stop.

Oh my God, Manny, what...?

Manny didn't answer, but someone did. I heard a voice outside the window, and I saw a face. *Gabriel!* 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?

Mama...can we call her?

Gabriel nodded, and carried us to a car. He laid me down on the back seat. We had left everything in the truck, but I didn't care. We would be in Mexico City soon, and everything would be okay. I felt foggy, but light too, as if I could float into the air.

I heard him say *You're damn lucky...what the hell did you think you were doing, trying to outrun cops?*

"Sorry Gabriel," I whispered. "Manny got scared...the truck..."

It's okay, stay quiet now. We're taking care of you now.

I was lying in a bed. *Where's 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 got 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.

I smelled chocolate and cinnamon. *Gabriel...he's making atole.* We must have made it to Mexico City! Our brother was going to take care of us. I was warm, wrapped in soft gauze, a blanket woven of love and hope.

Can I taste the chocolate?...Gabe?

Gabriel isn't here.

Yes he is, I saw him, I saw him...

The smell changed to the odor of pungent fruit—not fresh fruit, but rotten, sickly. I knew it instantly—the stench of infection.

Manny! I looked toward his bed. He wasn't moving. I made my way over to him, threw back the bedcovers, and looked at his legs. The bandages were completely saturated with green fluid.

Oh God...

I began to cry. *Manny, no...* I backed away, falling onto my own bed. I looked down at my legs. They were bandaged.

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...we would be cured...you lied to me, you took all my blisters. That was only a joke, a joke between us...you can't really do that!*

I wept until a spasm of choking overtook me.

“Papa...! She’s awake.” It was my mother’s voice.

We’d never even made it to the Alabama border. They said the police had pulled us out of the mangled truck barely breathing. My luck was better than Manny’s, they said.

I know it wasn’t really luck.

Oh, Manny didn’t plan to crash the truck. But he always glimpsed something, even from the days when he laughed about buying my blisters.

Gabriel came home from Mexico City for Manny’s funeral. He looked like every breath hurt, and he couldn’t stop blaming himself. When I tried to explain that there was no blame, that Manny *knew*, he didn’t understand.

When I hugged him, he felt full of tense knots, but then he changed. I could feel him start to soften, to breathe again. I asked if he would make his chocolate *atole*. Tears began to run down his face.

“Manny would want you to—it was *una taza curativa*, remember?”

He promised me he would.

My memories around the accident are hazy, but they’re coming back in bits and pieces. I was so sure I saw Gabriel...but the doctors say it was the concussion, and my sisters say it was a dream.

I keep seeing Manny’s face, but if I try to get closer he fades back to the horizon, like a mirage. Sometimes he comes tapping at my bedroom window, just like old times, and I hear his voice: He calls out *Velma*...and then *We found the cure*.

At first I thought Manny lied to me, but he didn’t.

I have no more blisters. Gone. Mama calls it a miracle.

I still cry every day for Manny, but that's because I'm selfish and I miss him so much. Sometimes I wish the disease would come back and eat me alive, in exchange for giving me Manny for one hour.

Gabriel hasn't gone back to Mexico City. He keeps saying he wants to make everything right.

I keep telling him it's okay, it's right now.

It's morning. I wake to the fragrance of chocolate and cinnamon.