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1

POOR MAMA!

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The windowless bedroom was gloomy, with bare, thick adobe walls and a dirt floor. Sunlight streaming through the open door fell upon a hard wooden bed covered with a threadbare blanket.

Miriam Obregón lay on the bed, pale and panting. The midwife and the short stocky neighbor lady hovered nearby, concern written on their sweaty faces. They worried for the young mother as the hours ticked by.

“This can’t go on much longer,” the midwife clucked, “or the baby will die. Oh, what can we do?”

Miriam moaned from the bed and then croaked, “I’m going to die!”

“Don’t worry, I will help you,” the neighbor lady purred, scrambling onto the bed. “As long as there are women here to help, you won’t die. Everything will be all right. Can you sit up?” Embracing Miriam from behind, the woman squeezed as hard as she could—and the baby was born.

“It’s a boy!” the midwife cheered.

But the tiny infant did not cry. He lay still on the bed, his face purple from lack of oxygen. “He’s dead!” wailed the neighbor, burying her face in her hands.

The midwife rushed into action. “Bring some water!” she gasped. As

she picked up the tiny boy by his feet, the neighbor shoved a bowl of water onto the bed. With her free hand, the midwife splashed water onto the baby's back and began smacking him gently. The neighbor joined in, splashing water and pounding on the little body.

Suddenly the baby gasped. His thin feeble cry echoed through the house. Miriam smiled through her stupor. Little Omarcito Montenegro was going to live!

Later that day, the baby was breathing normally at Doña Miriam's breast when Grandma Ester came back from town with little Jáqueling, Miriam's first child. Jáqueling was a petite, lovable three-year-old. Not only was she as cute as a button, but she was also highly intelligent and perceptive.

Grandma Ester led the little girl to the bedroom. "Jáqueling, guess what!" she whispered. "Your mother had a baby. Now you have a little brother."

Jáqueling stalled just inside the doorway. She shook her head, staring at her mother and the little bundle at her side.

"Let's go see him," Grandma coaxed.

But Jáqueling refused to move. Giving her head a little jiggle, she said quietly, but clearly, "My poor mama!"

Three months later little Jáqueling contracted measles and died.

The Montenegro family never forgot the little drop of borrowed sunshine they had called Jáqueling. Nor did they forget what she had said when she first met her baby brother. When Omar Montenegro grew up to be a wild, rebellious youth, his mother Miriam suffered.

Years later, in Los Angeles, California, Omar's life spiraled deep into sin and crime. He was wanted by the authorities and hated by all. Even his mother was afraid of him.

Was Omar destined to always be an arrogant, violent man? Was Doña Miriam destined to suffer so intensely all her life? Would the Montenegro family forever shake their heads and whisper little Jáqueling's sad words, "Poor Mama"?

2

GUARDIAN ANGEL

GRANDMA ESTER WAS never really a grandmother, nor even a mother, for she and her husband Don Cruz were not able to have children. But if anybody in the Regadío Valley of northern Nicaragua had the heart of a mother or a grandmother, it was Grandma Ester.

The Cruz home was always open for anyone, especially the needy. When Doña Ester cooked a meal, hungry people soon found their way to her house. Though quiet old Cruz never said much, his grin indicated that he was in agreement with his wife's generosity.

Grandma Ester could afford to be generous. Don Cruz was a hard worker, and the couple owned land. In the Cruz house, there were always beans, corn for tortillas, salty homemade cheese, and even some money now and then for extras.

Years before Omarcito was born, Don Cruz's sister Chepa had quarreled with her husband. Destitute and homeless, she and her four children had moved in with her brother and his generous wife. Doña Ester promptly tucked the family into her heart and loved the children as her own grandchildren.

But Doña Chepa was still young and pretty. A neighbor man started courting her, and soon she went to live with him in his parents' house

down the street. Chepa's children didn't want to leave Grandma Ester. The oldest, nine-year-old Miriam, stood her ground. "I am not leaving with Mama," she declared to her younger sister Gladys. "Not if she leaves with that horrible man!"

"If you stay, I want to stay too," Gladys echoed. And that's how Grandma Ester acquired her first two foster daughters.

Doña Chepa took the two little boys with her. But since they lived close by, the boys spent more time with their sisters at Grandma Ester's place than with their mother and stepfather. So one day Grandma Ester asked Chepa if she could keep the two little tykes as well. Since Doña Chepa cared more about her new man than about her children, she readily agreed.

Even though Don Cruz and his wife Ester never legally adopted Chepa's children, they fed and dressed them, put them through school, and raised them to adulthood. All their lives the children called Ester their *Mimita*.¹

With extra mouths to feed, Grandma Ester started a small store to bring in a bit of income. Neighbors came for a kilo of beans or a liter of oil and a friendly chat. But after Miriam grew up to be a beautiful young lady, Ester was disturbed when a dashing young man, Fermín Montenegro, came often to hang out at the store. He dressed like a man from the city and handled himself like a king. He often brought them meat and stayed to eat the food that Miriam and Grandma Ester prepared.

Many times Grandma Ester reminded Miriam that Fermín was a married man who had abandoned his first wife only months after he had married her. "Sure, he owns a butcher shop, but he never gets ahead financially, and he doesn't own an inch of land, not even a house," she warned.

Miriam did not heed the warning. She married Fermín after he divorced his first wife. Fermín promptly moved into Don Cruz's already full house and became part of Grandma Ester's tribe.

Fermín and Miriam's first child, Jáqueling, was born in 1972. Little Omarcito arrived in 1975, just before Jáqueling's death. In 1976 another little girl was born and also named Jáqueling. A year later a second girl, Cándida, joined the family. Fermín and Miriam and their three children lived with Grandma Ester in the big house on Regadío's main street.

1 Mimita: endearing term for *mother*.