



Winner of the
2015 Manuscripts
Prose Contest
with
Lois Lowry

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Grown-Ups



Winner

Chapala, a town plastered with brightly colored homes, was small enough you could walk from one end to the other, but still occupied enough for Mami to remind us not to go out at night and even in daylight to travel in twos.

I was seven years old when a lady with a wrinkly face brought me here to the orphanage. I remember not long after that my mother visited me for lunch. There is a picture of it in my file. We were taught to make this orphanage our home. We called our caretakers Papi and Mami. All of us did—the boys and the girls. We had five mothers and one father. Papi Francisco and Mami Claudia were the oldest. Their daughter, Mami Juana, was my primary caretaker. She had round cheeks, a large soft stomach, kinky hair, and a husband we never saw. But we thought she spent time with her husband on the weekends when she left for her *días del descanso*. It was on one of these days that Fernanda and I decided to walk to the Soriana to purchase some lipstick. We were going to have a photo shoot.

“Mami Claudia,” Fernanda said, running ahead of me and slipping

her arm around Mami's stomach. "Can Peti and I walk to the *tiendita*?"

"What are you looking for that you must go to the store?" Mami Claudia always spoke fast, like warm tortillas rolled, her Rs quickly turning into Ls.

"We just really want some *taquis*," Fernanda pleaded. Us children considered the hardened miniature tortillas with orange pepper and crystallized lime a staple.

"And you have money?" Mami asked.

"Yes, Peti has the money that her sponsors gave her last week," said Fernanda.

I gave Mami Claudia a quick nod while holding out my hand to reveal two coins of ten pesos each.

"Okay," Mami conceded, "But go quickly."

Fernanda and I hopped from rock to rock on the narrow cobblestone road. A few boys with dark matted hair and dirt-streaked faces sat on the sidewalk, a soccer ball resting between them.

"Ch-ch," they called, "ch-ch. Eh, eh, eh, *gordita*."

"Ignore them," said Fernanda, jutting her head in the opposite direction of the boys. As we were just past, I gave my head a slight turn and glanced over at the boys out of the corner of my eye. They were still looking at us, and the one on the right, the one with dimples, winked at me. I quickly turned my head back around.

"I wish I looked more like you," I told Fernanda. "The boys always call out to you."

"How do you know they weren't calling to you?" she said defensively.

"Because," I hesitated, "they said '*gordita*.'"

"Yeah, well, they still could have been talking to you. You know, I watched you when you were changing this morning and your stomach looked kind of fat. But you don't have an ass, so they probably were talking to me. That's all they really see, you know," she said with a sigh.

Fernanda tended to get mad easily. Just last week she and Marcos got into a fist fight on the way home from school. George, the driver, pulled the bus over and separated them, setting Fernanda in the front row of the van and Marcos in the last. Once we pulled up to the orphanage, Fernanda was sent straight to the psychiatrist while Marcos, nose bloodied, had to talk with Papi Francisco. Fernanda also knew a lot more about boys than I did. At twelve-and-a-half years old, she was five months older than me, but in her mind, I might as well have been a four year old.

We quickly ran down the main sidewalk through the orphanage,

mango trees and small labeled buildings on either side: *escuelita*, *oficina*, *casa de niños*, *cocina* and finally *casa de niñas*. The “Rose Building,” as the adults called the housing for girls, was named for the pink paint that now chipped from the doorways and window frames. Fernanda ran past the row of bunk beds to her own, reached underneath and grabbed out a flat bill cap with the letters NY on the front. It looked just like the one we had seen Daddy Yankee wearing in his music video. Fernanda applied the pink-plum lipstick as I folded the bottom of my tank top to reveal my stomach, tucking it securely into my bra. I looked down at my chest and imagined when the gaps in my bra would be filled and I had more than nubs for boobs.

“Okay, your turn,” Fernanda passed me the tube of lipstick, “Wait—I’ll do it. I don’t want you to mess it up.” She cupped my face with her left hand while slowly lining my puckered lips with the pink stain. I dug the tight black mini skirt out from the bottom of my panty drawer and shoved it into my small pink sequined purse. Fernanda and I would trade off wearing the skirt during our photo shoot, since our Papi and Mamis constantly sifted through the donated clothes, usually throwing out such “immodest” materials. We slipped out the back gate and headed toward the plaza.

Carlos was a friend from school. While Fernanda and I were in sixth grade, Carlos was two grades ahead in eighth. I had never met him, but Fernanda said that he took pictures of all the eighth grade girls and only of sixth-graders when they were really pretty, so I needed to keep quiet and let her do the flirting. Carlos’ family owned a *paletería* on the street just behind the plaza. This is where Carlos met us girls. He took us behind the ice cream bar and through a large hall serving as a pathway from his family’s living space to the shop. Their home smelled of a mixture of sweet bread and musty plaster. The room he took us to was simple: typical plastered walls, a dingy white loveseat, a camera, and a picture of bloodied Christ on the cross. In the corner, behind a rigged-up curtain, was where we could change.

“Okay, *chicas*,” Carlos said from the other side of the curtain. “We’re all ready out here.”

Fernanda grabbed the Daddy Yankee hat from the floor and led me out. Carlos let out a whistle as soon as we came into his view.

“Looking good, *chicas*.” Carlos had a friend. I recognized him now as the boy with dimples. I felt my heart beating while a surge of energy passed through my stomach.

Carlos got behind the camera, and Fernanda positioned herself on the couch, sitting on the edge. Carlos went back and forth from looking

behind the camera to repositioning Fernanda on the couch, his hands wandering freely through her hair, down her arms and finally to her legs, each time preparing her for a pose he'd either seen on a "music video one time" or in a "sexy movie."

Carlos' friend moved toward me and smiled. "I'm Alejandro. I think I've seen you around—maybe school. You go to the *Técnica*, right?"

I nodded.

"I remember you," he said, "because I always think of how pretty you are."

"Thanks," I said as my stomach fluttered.

"Let's see," he said, "You like music?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"*Maná*?"

"Of course," I replied, "everyone loves *Maná*."

"*Labios compartidos, labios divididos, mi amor*," he began singing.

I laughed.

"Why are you laughing at me?" he asked.

"Because," I said, "you're not very good at singing."

He chuckled at this and leaned in closer.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked.

I was shocked since we hadn't even held hands. I thought that came first, then we'd go to the movies and we'd sit really close and take turns tickling each other's hands, and then maybe we'd walk back to the orphanage in the dark, and I'd tease him while leaning against the gate and then he'd ask, "Can I kiss you?"

"You okay?" Alex said.

"Yeah, I'm just really not feeling well. I think I might be sick or something."

"Really?" Alex asked with raised eyebrows. He laughed. "Let me guess, you've never been kissed."

I had been kissed. By a man much older than me, at an age much younger than I already was. I just thought this was supposed to be different. Maybe the kids at school didn't talk about why kids like us were in the orphanage. Maybe they really didn't know.

"No," I let out a soft laugh. "I've never been kissed."

Carlos joined Fernanda on the couch, and now they were in a full make-out session. He dipped his head to Fernanda's chest and began to smooch his face between her breasts. Fernanda looked up at me with widened eyes. She would never admit it, but I could see she was scared. This was the life we'd been rescued from. I couldn't remember why we

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thought this photo shoot was a good idea. Alex's hand felt like a brick around my waist. I gave Fernanda a slight wave, signaling for her to come over. She either didn't see or ignored me. Either way, I ran.

As I raced down the cobblestone road toward the orphanage, I pulled my shirt to cover my stomach, and tears fell from my eyes. About a block away from the orphanage, I stopped and sat down on a corner. I didn't want to go in without Fernanda, but I also knew I didn't want to go back to the *paletería*.

A few moments later Fernanda came into view, her short legs in a sluggish jog. She slowed to a walk as she saw me, her hands wrapped around her waist, breathing heavily.

"What in the world, Peti?" she said between pants. "What is your problem?"

"My problem? I didn't like what he was doing to you. This was supposed to be fun."

"Really, Peti? Grow up. What did you expect?"

I lowered my eyes. My argument started sounding dumb. "I don't know. I just didn't expect he would—"

"Listen, Peti," she cut in as if I were a first-grader. "You embarrassed me. I doubt Carlos will ever talk to me again. I liked what he was doing to me. It's just part of growing up, you know." She sighed.

But I didn't know. I didn't.