

The Gift

Evelyn L. Dunbar Webb

“You don’t understand, Mama,” Carrie whined. “These girls hurt me. Look at my dress!” She tore off what was left of her outfit and tossed it on the floor, then sat at the kitchen table in her slip. A potato peel hung below her mother’s hands, almost to her feet. Carrie yanked the peel and threw it aside.

“You take ten years off my life, *querida*; that is not the act of a good daughter.”

“You’re ignoring me. Is that the act of a good mama?”

Her mother placed the potato in the bowl, careful not to bruise the skinned flesh. She wiped her hands and smoothed the towel in her lap.

“I see the marks,” she said softly. “They will heal, *querida*; you are young.”

“I don’t care if they heal,” Carrie spun in her chair. “I’m not a baby anymore, Mama. Why won’t you let me fight back?”

“You are eleven—not a baby, no. But you have much to learn. Ladies do not raise the voice. Ladies do not make the ball with their hands. These girls, they are not ladies. You are.”

“Me being a lady doesn’t stop them from hurting me.”

“I will fix the dress. It will be very pretty, you will see.”

“I’m never wearing it again. That dress is the reason those girls ganged up on me.”

“Why these girls care about your dress?”

Carrie’s eyes glistened. “It’s secondhand—like all my clothes. They called me trash.”

Her mother said nothing, just folded and unfolded the towel in her lap. A wave of guilt gripped Carrie’s thoughts, but she shook it off. When her mother raised her head, the eyes that met Carrie’s were wide and searching.

“You are ashamed, *querida*.”

Carrie wished she could become part of the wall. All of her mother’s warmth had left her voice. “I didn’t mean—”

“I cannot fix your shame. We are poor, *sí*. The dress, it was mine, *sí*. I give it to you. It is special.”

“It’s just a dress.”

“No. It was a gift to your *abuela* from her mama.”

“You’ve always said it was something Gramma Rosa made for you.”

“*Fix* for me. The cloth, it was made by your *bisabuela* Carmen.”

“How could I wear a dress made by my great-grandmother? It would fall apart.”

“Blessings, *querida*.”

Carrie rolled her eyes. “If it was such a blessing, how come it let Clara and the others beat on me? Why didn’t the dress zap them or something?”

“The blessing, that is not how it works,” her mother smiled.

“Then what good is it?”

“The dress is your *historia*. It is all I can give you. Your *bisabuela*, she give it to Rosa. Rosa fix for me, and I do same for you.” Carrie’s mother reached for her hand. “You will fix for your daughter when the time comes.”

“Not if those girls have anything to say about it.” Carrie thudded into her seat. “I have to fight them, Mama. They will not stop otherwise.”

“For why, *querida*? To fight will not stop your shame. They will find something else to hurt you.” Her mother lowered her eyes. “They always do.”

That voice again. “What’s wrong, Mama?”

“There is nothing wrong; I am tired. Go—wash your face, get dressed. Your papa, he will be home soon. We must have supper ready.”

Carrie watched from the doorway as her mother gently pulled the next potato from the bowl. Inch by inch, the peel grew in length, wafer-thin skin dangling from slim fingers as she twisted and scraped. *One inch equals one year, querida. Take care not to snap it off, or the luck, it will break.*

In the bathroom, Carrie stared at her face in the mirror. Bits of gravel dusted her long sable hair with gray. She raked away the snarls. *I hate that Clara.* The scratches on her chin had faded, but there was a bruise beginning under her left eye, on her cheekbone. Red and purple, streaked with yellow and green, it was puffy and sensitive to the light touch from her fingertips. She rinsed a washcloth in cold water and held it against her cheek. Maybe she could cover it up tomorrow with some of Mama’s makeup.

She pulled another dress from her closet and rubbed the material between her thumb and forefinger. *Another hand-me-down...*

“It doesn’t *feel* like it’s old.”

“Carina,” her mother called, “I need you.”

“I’m coming!” She wiggled into the shirtwaist and hurried back to the kitchen.

Her mother was at the stove mixing canned tomatoes, corn, and beans into a pan with chopped beef. Carrie pulled the bowl of peeled potatoes off the table, dumped them into a colander and rinsed them under the tap, then wiped her mother’s paring knife on a towel and cut the potatoes into small cubes.

“Tell me, Mama, what’s so special about the dress?”

“I told you. It is your *historia*.”

“But how does that make it a blessing?”

“It is what gives you strength inside. No one can take from you your *historia*. Even when those girls make the ball with their hand and hit you, your *historia* does not go away.”

“But that’s not a blessing. Blessings are all about the power of *Jesu* and the angels who make wishes come true and heal people. My history isn’t a blessing; it’s just ancestors and all that.”

“Bah!” Her mother waved her hand. “The wishes, the healing, they are *glaseado*, nothing more. But power, *sí*.” She turned to Carrie and tapped against her breastbone. “That is the strength inside you, the blessing.”

Carrie again rinsed the potatoes, put them in a large saucepan, and covered them with fresh water. She set the pot to boil on the stove, then pulled two large onions from the bin. After peeling the outer skin, she chopped them and added the pieces to her mother’s pan with some rice and the juice from the tomatoes. Water spit and sizzled out and over the edge of the potato pot. Carrie lowered the heat, then pulled a clean bowl from the cabinet next to the stove.

“Sit, Carina; I will fix the potato bread. Let me see your face.” Her mother brought ice cubes wrapped in a linen dishtowel to the table. “Your eye, it swells.”

Carrie took the towel and gingerly placed it against her cheekbone. “How do I get them to stop, Mama? If I can’t fight them, what do I do?”

“Stay away from them. They are not friends.”

“You’ve told me this for over a year.” Carrie winced as the ice seeped through the linen. Her fingers numbed, sticking to the rough cloth. “I try to ignore them, but they follow me. They won’t leave me alone.”

“You cannot fight, *querida*; you cannot win. They will keep hurting you, so you stay away. If they follow you, walk away. Believe in your *historia*, let *Jesu* grow inside you. They will see it. When they do, they will stop.”

“But what’s so special about my *historia*? Were we rich or something?”

Her mother sighed. “Before the war, your *bisabuela*, she was very rich, *sí*. There was much property, outside Havana. Then the butcher of Cuba, he make her move away.”

“Butcher?”

“A very bad man—*Capitán-general* Valeriano Weyler.”

“Why didn’t Granpa Tomás stop him?”

“He must serve his country, Carina, so he march with *Generalissimo* Gómez. Your *bisabuela*, she go with friends to the city. But she was not free. The city, it was jail. Her home, her fields, everything, all burn, except the dress she wore.”

“But how did she survive?”

“She was sick, she was hungry, like the others. Weyler’s men, they curse her. They beat her. They tore her dress. Every night she fix, every day they tear again; but she not give up.” Her mother took the towel and brought it to the sink. She rinsed it in warm water and hung it on the drying rack. “Your *bisabuela* Carmen—strong inside, a real lady; she never curse at the butcher or his men. She pray.”

“What happened when Granpa Tomás came back?”

Her mother smiled. “After the war, your *bisabuelos* move to Miami to live with the *desterrados*. That is where your *abuela* Rosa was born. Carmen fix the dress for Rosa to wear for school. She add more cloth when Rosa marry. Rosa, she fix for me to wear to dances. I wear when I meet your papa. I also wear when I marry your papa. Then I cut for you to wear.”

“It’s a rag, Mama.”

“You wait, *querida*; you will see. A blessing.”

“This is different,” Carrie shook her head. “Clara, Paula, and Denise—they are not soldiers, but they have no respect.”

“You think soldiers have respect, Carina? Your *bisabuela*, she no care what they do or say.”

“How did *you* survive, Mama?”

“I do not understand—”

“—yes, you do,” Carrie grabbed her mother’s hand. “Mama, look at me. I know; I see your eyes. I see your face. I see—”

“—what, *querida*?” Her mother’s eyes met her gaze, sparks of dark brown stabbing at Carrie like sharp branches.

“Were *you* in a war, Mama?”

Her mother’s face flushed. “We move to Texas when I was a little girl, San Antonio. Your *abuelo*, he work for transport company, across the border, in *México*.”

“What was it like? Was it beautiful?”

“Miami, San Antonio, *México*,” her mother shrugged, “no difference. We still poor, and *desterrados*. No *méxico* wants to be near *cubano*, Carina. The soldiers on the border, they were like the butcher. They come to town, stare at the *cubana* girls, wait for us after school. They not nice men. They hurt me,” she swallowed. “I could not fight them.”

Carrie frowned. She tried to picture the men, big, laughing like the girls at school, pulling at her mother's dress. "They *rape* you, Mama?"

Her mother wiped her eyes. "*Sí*."

"But why didn't you run away? How did you get them to stop?"

"They hold me, *querida*. They push, tear my dress, call me names. They want me afraid, but I show nothing. They want to control me, but I say nothing. When they look in my face, I do not cry." Her mother raised her chin. "I take their fun away. The hurt, it passes. The marks, they heal."

Carrie sat still for several moments, her head overstuffed with questions. "How—how did you not feel shame?"

Her mother scoffed. "I am lady, like my mama, like my *abuela*. So what I hurt outside; inside, I am strong."

"Does Papa know?"

"I tell him when he ask to marry me," her mother's eyes flared, "he love me, no matter." She gently stroked her daughter's bruised cheek. "But enough of this sad talk. Remember the blessing of the dress, Carina. It protect me, it protect you; that is the gift."

The next morning, blocked from the schoolyard, Carina María Consuela Rodríguez faced a line of taunting, spiteful girls. She squared her shoulders and breathed slowly, then shoved her way through, flinching when the girls pulled her hair, biting her lip when they pushed her. Then the twistband she had used to tie her ponytail broke, and her hair slid from around her back. In the safety of its silky, sable darkness, Gramma Rosa's quiet face flashed through her mind. Carrie thought about Gramma Carmen and the soldiers, her mother and the border guards. She thought about *Jesu* and the Romans. *I am a lady* she silently seethed, clenched and opened her fists, muttered a quick prayer, and moved away.