

All God's Children (Cont'd)

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Later, when David would try to make sense of the day, it was a blur.

The older woman finally stopped hugging him but then she'd said to David, "Come into the kitchen with me. I need some help."

And he didn't question, because it would never occur to him to question and adult.

"Can you peel potatoes?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good." She gestured to a stool at the counter. "Sit here where I can look at you and you can peel the potatoes after I scrub them."

And she scrubbed, and he peeled. And every few minutes he would see her stop moving her hands and just look at him, a lingering five-second look, and the corners of her mouth would turn up into a small smile.

"You can call me Abuela," she told him. "Say it after me... a-bu-e-la."

"A-bu-e-la," David repeated.

"Very good," she said. "And the old man is Abuelo... a-bu-e-lo. But you can call him Shorty."

"Good job," she said after the bowl was full. "So now you go play. Your puppy is in the backyard waiting to see you."

David ran outside to see Moses. They wrestled in the fallen leaves. Moses was learning to chase tennis balls but didn't return them so they played tennis ball tag.

David could see Mike and Abuela through the window, preparing food and laughing. And then Abuelo came into the back yard and sat in a chair and looked at a newspaper. And he could hear the bouncy-music through the screen door to the kitchen because it was warm enough outside to leave it open.

An hour or so later, another car pulled up in front of the house and a man and woman got out, and two girls, about his age, he thought, but maybe a little older, maybe teenagers. And Mike and Abuelo and Abuela went out to the road, and they were all hugging and kissing cheeks, and then carrying in bowls and plates filled with food.

David stood behind the tree and fence in the backyard and watched as if he were watching movie. He did not go into the house.

After a few minutes Mike came out.

"They want to meet you if you're ready," he said.

David did not know how to respond. It wasn't like he could say "No, thank you." Or "Some other time perhaps." It wasn't like declining was an option. So why did Mike keep putting things to him as if there was a choice. Why didn't Mike just tell him what to do, just say, "Come inside and meet them now."

"Are you alright?" Mike asked. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No," David replied.

The woman said to call her "Aunt Maggie."

The man said he was "Uncle Bill."

The girls were Ellie and Sarah.

They all kept saying how glad they were to meet him, and how much Mike had told them about

him. Which seemed odd as he didn't think Mike knew that much about him to tell.

Then Abuela called out, "Dinner is ready."

And they all went toward the table. David stood back, not knowing where to sit. But then Abuela looked at him and gestured. "You sit there," she pointed. "Next to me."

Abuelo was at the head of table, and Abuela next to him, then David and Ellie and Sarah and Bill and Maggie and Mike. Eight of them.

"Hold hands for the grace," Abuela said, extending her hand to David, almost in his face, so that he had no choice but to take it, to feel her soft warmth. And, on his other side, Ellie reached under the table and grabbed his other hand and squeezed.

"We come to this table filled with gratitude," intoned Abuela. "We see before us the fruits of the earth you have given us. Our hearts are filled with thanks. Lord of all, for all the gifts you bring into our lives, for the health you have given us to enjoy those lives, for the love we have for each other. And we are most grateful, so very grateful for the nieto and nietas at our table. Our hearts are filled with joy on this Thanksgiving day."

"Abuela does get a bit sappy," Ellie whispered to David as she dropped his hand and reached past him for the bowl of stuffing.

The dinner went on and on.

It was noisier than at home. Everyone kept talking as they ate, passing platters around the table. The two girls talked as much as the adults. They even interrupted the adults. David sat quietly passing the platters, and eating carefully, with his mouth closed, like you were supposed to, as the words flowed around him.

Until he heard his name.

"Well, David, how does it feel to discover you have a whole family you never knew about?" the aunt Maggie woman was asking.

"Maggie leave the kid alone," said Mike.

"It's a simple question," replied Maggie.

"No, Maggie, it isn't."

"Look, he just met his grandparents and aunt and uncle and cousins. He must have some reaction."

David felt his face get hot. He felt sweat on his palms.

"What grandparents?" he asked, and even as he said the words, he felt stupid. He hadn't let himself know. It was like a connect-the-dots puzzle in a little kids coloring book. He'd seen the page but had not drawn the lines to make the picture.

There was a moment of total silence.

Then Abuela spoke, in a voice that was very gentle but also very firm.

"I am your grandmother. You are the son of my son. You have our blood in you."

"Ma," Mike interrupted. "Enough with the blood."

"But you said your name was Abuela," David said, his voice sounding thick and slow even to himself.

"Abuela and Abuelo means grandmother and grandfather in Spanish," Mike said, his voice cautious. "Your mother's parents are Fred and Marge, and my parents are Luis and Marta. And they're from El Salvador which means that you are one-half Salvadoran. And Maggie is my sister and Bill is her husband and Sarah and Ellie are your cousins. Just like all the cousins you have at home."

Dave felt confusion rising in him along with bile in his throat.

He knew they were Mike's parents. He knew that. But he could not make the leap to feeling that Mike's family had anything to do with him. He had grandparents and he had aunts and uncles. And they all lived together in The Place. And these people? They could not be, could never be, his family.

"I don't feel well," he said, and he bolted from the table and ran into the back yard.

Mike followed him out. He tried to touch David's shoulder, but David flinched and Mike pulled his hand back.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just didn't realize that you..."

"Can I just be alone for a while?" David asked. "Please."

"Sure, David. I'll let Moses out to keep you company."

It was almost an hour before someone came out to get him.

Sarah walked over and plopped down on the grass and reached out to scratch Moses behind the ears.

"We're getting ready for pie. Do you want some?" Sarah asked. "C'mon. Abuela makes the best pies. Like, the very best."

"I'm not stupid," David said.

"What? You mean about the family stuff?"

"Yes."

"So you really didn't know we were your cousins?"

"I wasn't thinking that way," David said.

"Well, aren't we like all your *other* cousins?" Sarah asked.

David looked blank.

"You have grandparents that live there with you, right? Your mom's parents? Fred and what's her-name?"

"My grandma's name is Marge," David said.

"Yeah, right. And the aunts and uncles that are your mom's brothers and sisters?"

"Yes."

"And Uncle Mike told us that everyone lives on the same block? Isn't that, like weird?"

"No."

"But you have other cousins, right? Doesn't your step-dad have brothers or sisters? And what about his parents?"

"He isn't my step-father. He's my father." David heard, with a certain detached recognition, that his voice was louder.

"Whatever," Sarah said. "But we're like his parents, and his brothers or sisters, and their kids. How often do you see them? Because we're just like them. We're cousins but we don't live here."

"I don't know."

"Like you don't know where they live or you don't know them?"

"I don't know them."

"None of them?"

"No."

"Wow, my mom was right." Sarah said. "I didn't, like, believe her."

She stopped and looked at David as if deciding whether to continue.

"My mom googled your family when Uncle Mike first told her about you. She said your grandpa doesn't let anyone in the family have contact with any other relatives. If you're not in the church, you don't, like, exist. Your grandpa has a younger sister, her name is Martha Jean, who he cut off and

refuses to speak with even though she married the man who used to be Fred's very best friend. And Fred cut off his own father and step-mom, broke his dad's heart, or that's what my mom said. And your grandma, Marge, has, like, nine brothers-and-sisters that she never sees or talks to, and they have kids and their kids must have kids.

Sarah paused in her monologue, looking at David's face.

"Do you not know all this?"

He looked frozen but she plunged ahead anyway.

"My mom says you must have dozens of cousins. But you're really special for us. 'Cause we just have Uncle Mike, and our dad was an only child, so he is our only uncle in the world and you are our very first cousin. We're family now."

David again felt heat rising in him, and his stomach again clenched into a tight knot. It was as if the words were black flies buzzing around his head and trying to crawl into his ears and he needed to make them go away but his hand wouldn't move.

I have a family, he said to himself. We live together at The Place. We are Chosen by God to tell the world all about its sins. We are special.

"So, do you like apple-pie-and-ice-cream or pecan?" Sarah asked.

"It doesn't matter," David replied.

He stood up, brushed off the leaves, and followed Sarah into the house.