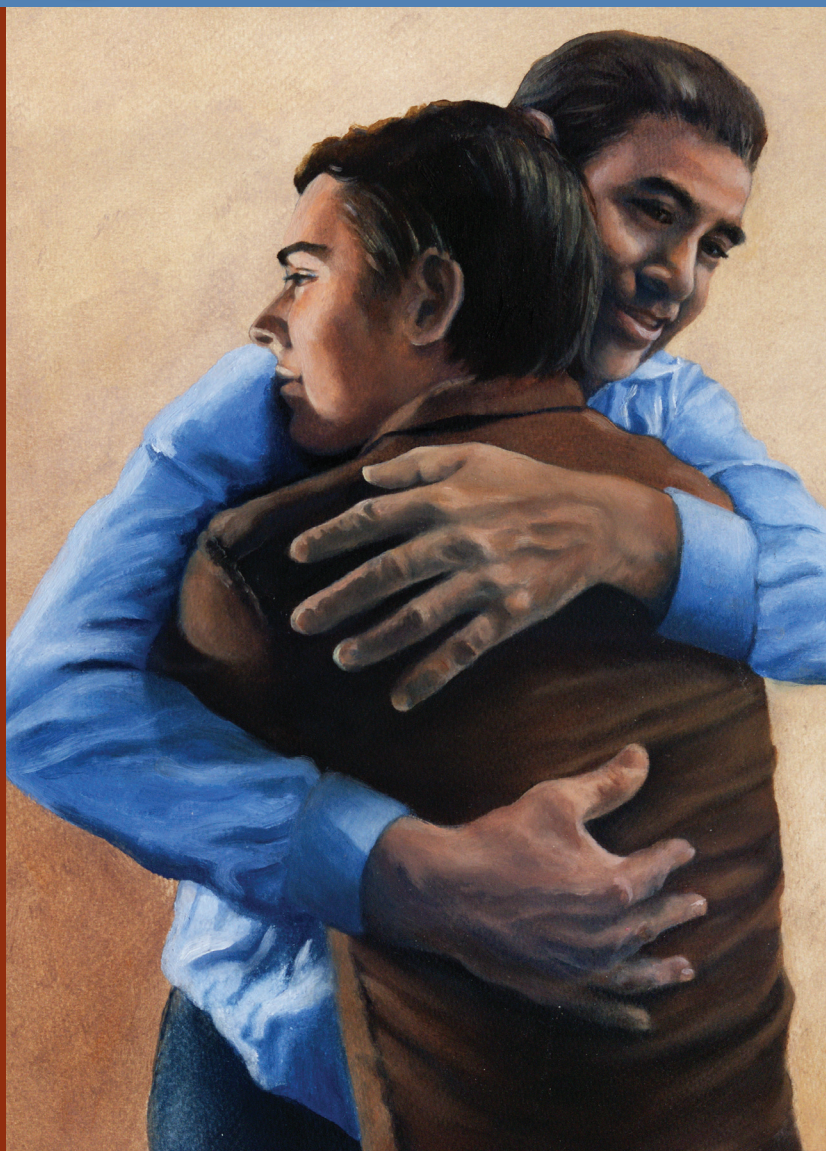


ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL SERIES

Forgiving Moses



Gloria L. Velásquez

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IN LOVING MEMORY
OF
JUAN RICARDO LOPEZ

Mi gran amor eterno
1958–2014

ONE

Moses

I'm dreaming I'm back in Salinas when I'm suddenly jolted into the present. "Mom says it's time to get up," my little sister, Carmen, hollers out. I wait for a moment until I hear the door shut and I know she's gone. I roll onto my back, trying hard to retrieve images from my dream. I was with my best friend, Arturo, and we were washing his Mom's blue Honda. Even though it was an old car with huge dents in it, Arturo's mom used to give him twenty bucks every time he washed it. I'd usually go over to help, and when we were done we'd go to Dominic's and stuff our faces with pizza. How I wish I were back in Salinas with Arturo instead of here in this strange apartment in a foreign city.

As I slide out of bed and reach for my jeans, I imagine that I'm going to meet Arturo at the bus stop like I did every morning. Arturo wouldn't stop talking while we waited for the bus that would take us to Salinas High. And almost every conversation was about girls and cars. I used to tease him about which was better—the girl or the car, and he'd laugh saying, "Hey, bro, can't have one without the other."

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It makes me sick to think of another new school. This is my fourth school since junior high. First, we moved to Tehachapi, then Delano, then Salinas. And now . . . this dumb ass place, only this one is worse. Why can't we just stay in one city? I'm sick of it all. It's so depressing. New teachers. New schedules. New friends. Seems like just when I make a good friend like Arturo, we move again. Why can't it all stay the same for once?

I can smell Mom's coffee as I walk into the kitchen. Mom is sitting at the table with Carmen, who is having some Rice Krispies. Mom is dressed in her ugly, pink CNA scrubs. Her dark brown hair is pulled back with a clip, making her full face stand out even more. There are traces of blue eyeshadow on her eyelids. Mom hardly ever wears make-up except for her beige lipstick.

As I pour myself some cereal, she says, "*Hijo*, I'll drop you both off at school on my way to the nursing home."

"I'm fed up with moving around. Why couldn't we have stayed in Salinas?"

Mom shakes her head. "You know why we moved here, *hijo*. You watch, you'll make new friends in no time."

Wiggling in her chair as if she has to go to the bathroom, Carmen says, "I already made friends with Tammy. She lives in the apartment next to us. I think she has an older brother. Maybe you can meet him."

It's a good thing Carmen is only in third grade; otherwise she'd hate this as much as I do. It's all an adventure for her.

"Thanks, but no thanks," I answer, realizing Carmen is only trying to make me feel better. If only I could be that innocent and carefree. If only I didn't hate my life.

“Time to go,” Mom says, lifting her small round body from the kitchen chair. “Carmen, don’t forget your backpack.”

Ten minutes later, we pull up to the front of César Chávez Elementary School. I wait in the car while Mom walks Carmen to her classroom. Rolling my window down for some fresh air, I can hear car doors slamming as parents drop off their kids. Gazing around at the fancy houses with perfectly trimmed lawns, all I can think about is how to start all over again. You’d think this was just another day, that I’d be used to it, but I’m not. I wonder if Arturo already found another friend to replace me. I promised I’d call him, but what for? I’d have to fake it, pretend that everything is cool.

Mom does her best to sound cheerful as she climbs back in the car and we drive away. “Isn’t it pretty here?” she says, pointing to the golden rolling hills in the background as we head toward the downtown area. It almost looks like a scene from a postcard, wide tree-lined streets with beautiful mountain peaks in the background.

“I like Salinas better,” I insist, remembering it’s run-down buildings, bustling streets and used car lots. Arturo and I would walk around for hours checking out the cars for sale. Then we’d eat at our favorite Mexican *taquería*. I’ll never forget the smell of the *carne asada* being grilled and how Don Raimundo, the owner, liked to tease us, calling us *vagos* the moment we arrived.

Mom doesn’t speak again until we arrive at Roosevelt High. “It looks like a newer school,” she says as we turn onto the campus packed with students and cars. It’s definitely smaller and more modern compared to Salinas High,

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which was made up of several old, historic buildings. It almost took up an entire block. Mom is about to drive me all the way up to the front, but I stop her. “Right here’s fine,” I demand, so she pulls over to the side.

“*Hijo*, I know you’re not happy about this, but we all have to try to make the best of it. And don’t forget to go home on the bus. Carmen will be at Mrs. Pantoja’s until you pick her up. I’ll be home by five.”

“*Make the best of it*,” I mutter under my breath, slamming the door behind me. How am I supposed to do that when I feel so miserable? Reluctantly, I make my way through groups of strangers. *Mostly white kids*, I think to myself until I hear a group of students speaking in English and Spanish. A short girl with black, wavy hair and bright red lipstick smiles at me as I walk past them.

In the main office, I go straight to the front desk. The receptionist, who is wearing a pair of weird purple-rimmed glasses that clash with her bright red hair, greets me with a friendly smile.

“Good morning. I’m Jan. What can I help you with?” she asks in a high soprano voice that makes me want to cover my ears.

“I’m Moses Vargas. It’s my first day here.”

“Welcome. We’re happy to have you here.”

As she hands me my schedule, she tells me I will have to go talk to Mrs. Bates, the freshman counselor. I follow her around the corner to the counseling area where she points out Mrs. Bates’ office.

“Thank you,” I say as she wishes me good luck.

Tapping lightly on the door, I take in a deep breath. I know it’s time to pretend, to suck it all up just like the last

time. Moments later, a slender woman wearing a red blazer with grey slacks, opens the door and lets me in.

“We’ve been expecting you, Moses. Welcome to Roosevelt.” Mrs. Bates shakes my hand, inviting me to take a seat on the small wooden chair next to her desk.

While she pulls up my schedule on her computer, I glance at the framed photograph of Mrs. Bates with her family. They all look so happy that I’m tempted to turn the picture face down.

“I’ve already seen your transcripts—you’re a very good student, especially in math and science,” Mrs. Bates says. “You have algebra first period, science second, English third, then lunch. In the afternoon you have P.E. and computer science. It’s a good schedule since your most difficult classes are in the morning.” She pauses to hand me a tardy slip, a map of the campus and a student planner. “I’ve also included a list of our clubs and sports in case you’re interested in joining one. Do you have any questions?”

I quietly shake my head side to side.

“Well then, let me call one of our student assistants so they can walk you over to the math building.”

“I can find it on my own,” I insist, rising to my feet. The last thing I need is for everyone to think I’m a big baby. It’s bad enough that I’m the new *tonto* on the block.

Mrs. Bates nods. “Remember, Moses. If you have any questions, come see me any time.”

It only takes me a few minutes to find the math building. I’m a genius with maps. When I walk into algebra and hand the teacher the tardy slip, I feel sweat trickling down my armpits. Everyone is staring at me.

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“Welcome, Moses. I’m Mr. Bukowski, better known as Mr. B.” His broad face breaks into a smile, revealing several crooked teeth. “We’re on page 120—please take that seat,” he says, pointing to the empty desk on the third row.

In a few minutes, I’m immersed in the world of algebra. I’ve always loved math, ever since I was in elementary. Logarithmic functions don’t faze me at all. Arturo used to tease me about being a math nerd. He could barely figure out basic problems, and I used to help him all the time with his homework.

I’m almost finished with the assignment when the bell rings. I stuff my math book and binder back into my backpack, and make my way to the noisy hallway. At least my science class is in the same building and I don’t have to pull out my map and search for it.

By lunchtime, I’m fed up with everyone looking at me. All I want is to be alone, so I go to the library where I find a quiet corner in the back. Ignoring my growling stomach, I pick up a *National Geographic* off the nearest table. This month’s issue is about Costa Rica. The first article is about the weirdly named Bri Bri, an indigenous people on the Caribbean coast. I imagine myself wandering through the tropical forests of Costa Rica, forgetting all about being a stranger in a new city and school.