

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL SERIES

Rudy's Memory Walk



Gloria L. Velásquez

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Books in

**THE ROOSEVELT HIGH
SCHOOL SERIES**

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Rudy's Memory Walk

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SCHOOL SERIES**

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Summary: As high school senior Rudy adjusts his attitudes toward the elderly when his senile grandmother has to move in with his family, his girlfriend encourages him to talk with a friend's mother who has similar problems with her own mother.

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In memory of Francisca Molinar Velásquez
1929-2007

ONE

Rudy

Dad never chills, he's always uptight. The minute he hears the door open, he's on me about his car. "Did you leave me some gas?" he asks as I walk into the living room. Mom, who is on the loveseat talking on the telephone, glances my way. There is a strained look on her face, like when Dad gets trashed with one of his *compadres*. Something's gotta be up, I think, handing Dad the keys.

"I put ten bucks in after I dropped Juanita off. Where's Manuel?"

"He's upstairs doing his homework."

He's probably listening to that awful music if I know my little brother. Miracle he's not on the phone with one of those girls that call him all the time. Man, I wish I'd had that problem when I was an eighth grader. He acts like Mr. Hot Stuff, spiking up his black hair like a porcupine. Thinks he's a little Usher. Mom says Manuel's a lot like Dad—that he was a ladies man when they first met in San Antonio. That he had all kinds of *viejas* after him because he resembled a young Emiliano Zapata with his piercing eyes and thick black mustache. Why couldn't

I have looked more like Dad instead of Mom's side of the family? Mom says I look like Tío Manuel with my flat nose and pudgy cheeks.

"Damn Republicans! More tax cuts for the rich," Dad complains in response to the latest report on inflation. Dad always watches the evening news before he goes to bed. You'd think he'd do something different, like read a magazine or lift weights, but no—Dad never changes his routine. He's like an alarm clock that is set to go off at the same hour each day. Boring, that's what I think of Dad's life. He gets up at five a.m., grabs his Thermos of coffee and the lunch Mom packs every night, then drives off to Laguna Garbage where he's worked for the past seven years. How he stands it, I'll never know. But like Juanita and Maya are always reminding me, without a college degree, it's the ranks of the working classes. *Ni modo*. All I know is I ain't cut out for college.

Just as I am about to ask Dad who Mom is talking with, she hangs up the receiver. Her eyes are moist, and her lips are pinched. "What's wrong, Mom?" I ask.

Wiping away a tear sliding down her face, Mom answers, "Ay, *hijo*. It's Amá. She's real sick." Now Dad takes his eyes off the TV while Mom turns to him explaining, "That was Manuel in San Antonio. He says they can't take care of Amá anymore, that she's gotten worse."

"And what are we supposed to do?" Dad asks, the tension rising in his voice. I think back to the argument I overheard the last time Tío Manuel called, insisting we bring Abuela to live with us.

Mom sighs, her voice unsteady. "Manuel said we have to do something. Amá can't live with them no more. It's scaring the kids, and Amá said she wants to come live with me."

"Why you? Why not with Mariana?" Dad asks.

"Because I'm the oldest, that's why. And Manuel said if we don't take her, he's gonna have to put her in a home. I can't let that happen to her." Mom's voice breaks, so I move next to her, placing my arm around her bent shoulder. "Thanks, *m'ijo*," she whispers as Dad rises from the couch, mumbling he's going to bed.

"Do we have to bring Abuela here?" I ask softly. "I know she's my grandma and everything, but where's she gonna sleep?"

Mom squeezes my hand. "*M'ijo*, there is no other way. You'll have to share your room with Manuelito."

Thinking about how crowded we're going to be, I tell Mom, "Manuel's not going to like it. I can tell you that right now." Forcing out a "Goodnight," I head for the stairway. I can hear hip-hop sounds coming from Manuel's room as I fling his door open without knocking. Manuel is standing in front of his closet door mirror adding more gel to his spiked hair. "Hey, turn that music down! Dad's already in bed."

A conceited smirk spreads across Manuel's face. "Cut it out, Rudy. You're just jealous. I don't know what Juanita sees in your pudgy face anyway!"

Smiling, I answer, "That girl can't live without me. Remember, if you need any advice about chicks, just ask King Vato here."

Now Manuel orders me out of his room, and as I shut the door behind me, I think about what Mom said, hoping she changes her mind. It'd be major torture sharing a room with that little punk.

In my room, I set my alarm for seven a.m., then I pick up my Cucaracha comic book, but all I can think about is Abuela having to move in with us. How I wish I had a cell phone so I could call Juanita and talk with her about it. Guess I'll have to wait until tomorrow.

The next morning, Mom drops me off at Discount Foods on her way to the Coral Inn, where she's been cleaning rooms for the past five years. Mom's one of the head housekeepers, and she's always going on and on about how clean they keep the rooms. Sometimes she brings home huge tips from all the rich people who stay there. One time some man left her a \$50 tip. Mom was so excited that she couldn't talk about anything for months. If you want to know the truth, it makes me sick that Mom has to clean rooms for a living. Her back is always aching, and her hands always smell like cleaning detergent. But Mom insists the manager treats her really well and that it's way better than working in the fields. That's what she and Dad used to do in Texas—pick cotton. They moved around a lot, even went to Oregon until they finally came to California to work in San Martin. They ended up here in Laguna when Dad got on part-time with the garbage company.

I wave to Stella, the manager, as I shuffle to the back room to clock in. Next, I put on my apron and badge, walking back to the first cash register where Matt is already ringing up a customer. "Hi, Rudy. You're just in

time,” he says. I stare at the old man who is meticulously extracting a few dollar bills from his wallet to pay for his purchases. It takes him forever, but he finally hands the money to Matt. By then, I’ve bagged up his groceries and placed them on the cart. Following the old man out to the car, I’m forced to walk like a snail. And to top it off, it takes him just as long to open the car trunk.

“Thank you, young man,” he says as I finish placing the last bag of groceries neatly inside.

“You’re welcome, sir,” I reply, pushing the cart back to the racks at the front of the store and thinking how I never want to get like that old man.

The morning goes by quickly as I bag up groceries for one customer after another, but for some odd reason, I keep noticing all the old farts and how they hold up the lines, frustrating the customers behind them. I wonder if that’s how Abuela is going to be.

During my lunch break, I go over to the meat department to say hello to Mr. Cameron, Tyrone’s dad. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t have gotten this job. Mr. Cameron put in a good word for me with Stella when they were short-handed, and the next day I got the job. Tyrone was real bent because he wanted me to apply at Inboxes where he works, but I told him I’d always wanted to work in a grocery store. Mom thinks its cool since I get discounts on some of the store items.

“How’s it going, Mr. Cameron?” I ask, poking my head inside the double doors to the meat counter. Mr. Cameron pauses to gaze up at me. He’s wearing a nylon cap, and his white apron is covered with red stains.

“Couldn’t be better. Lots of meat to prepare. How about yourself? You and Tyrone staying out of trouble with them girlfriends?”

“Yeah, we’re way cool with them.”

Mr. Cameron smiles, and we talk for a few more minutes. As I return to bag groceries, I think about how angry Tyrone was when his dad took off, leaving the family alone. I’m glad Mr. Cameron returned home and that he and Tyrone are now getting along. My dad can be an idiot sometimes, but I don’t know what we’d do if he suddenly left. By the end of the day, my arms are aching from bagging groceries, and I’m eager to clock out and hop on the city bus.

When I get home, I find Mom lying on the couch elevating her feet. She’s watching the cooking channel. “Getting any new recipes from Rocko the Jocko?” I tease her.

“Today Rocchio is showing everyone how to make veal parmesan. How was work?”

“Good. Where’s Dad?”

“He went to the junkyard with his *compadre*. Won’t be home late.”

“*Híjole*, I wanted to borrow the car . . . I’m supposed to pick up Juanita in an hour.”

“Don’t worry, *hijo*. You can use mine. The keys are next to my purse on the little table.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I tell her as she goes on to ask if I’m hungry, but I explain that Juanita and I are eating at Foster Freeze.

“*Qué bueno*, the cook gets a night off,” Mom sighs.

“Isn’t Manuel here?”

Mom frowns. "I told him about Amá coming to live with us, and he got pretty mad, said he was going to Jordan's."

"I knew he wasn't going to like it."

I hope the news doesn't make Manuel do something stupid with Cassie's brother. Jordan acts like a little hood, always getting into trouble.

When I pick up Juanita, I go inside to say hello to her parents. Mr. Chávez sternly reminds me to be back by eleven, but Mrs. Chávez is warm and friendly. She even asks if Mom is still working at the Coral Inn. Before we leave, Celia, who looks like she is ready to pop asks if I can let Mom know that she's looking for part-time work and that she cleans really good. But Juanita laughs at her, reminding Celia she's gonna have a full-time job taking care of a baby.

On the drive to Foster Freeze, Juanita says, "You know, if it hadn't been for Celia getting pregnant, Apá would've never seen how strict he was and finally let me date."

"Lucky for me. When's her baby due?"

"In May. That's all Amá talks about."

"Yeah, I heard there's gonna be a big *pachanga*, that's what Maya told Tyrone."

Now Juanita's almond-shaped eyes brighten like two full moons. "Yeah, Apá wants to roast a pig. Ms. Martínez and Frank are gonna be the *padrinos*."

"That's great."

At Foster Freeze, we get in line and when we finally arrive at the register, there is an old lady who asks for our order—only it takes her the longest time to write it out. We're even forced to repeat what we ordered several times, since she has trouble hearing.

Heading back toward a booth with our order, I confess to Juanita, "I don't know why they hire old people to work in fast food places. They oughta get rid of them."

"Rudy, that's mean. One day you're gonna be old too."

"Well I'm not gonna act like that. I can tell you that right now."

No sooner have we sat down than the old lady approaches our booth saying, "I forgot to give you your change. Sorry."

As soon as she's out of sight, I gripe to Juanita, "See what I mean?"

"What's bugging you, Rudy? Since when did you get this mean attitude toward old people?"

Feeling the heat from Juanita's gaze, I answer, "Ever since I heard my grandma's coming to live with us, that's when."

Juanita's face softens. "She is? That's really nice."

"You gotta be kidding! I can't stand old people."

"Don't say that, Rudy. My *abuelita* died when I was a little girl and I never got to know her. And Apá's mom died when he was a baby. You're lucky to still have your *abuelita*."

"That's what you think!" I reply defensively. "Manuel and I might have to share a room. There goes my privacy."

“*Pobrecito*,” Juanita says sarcastically. “I’ve never once had a room all to myself. How can you be so selfish, Rudy? Think about all the families in California who live cramped up in apartments because they can’t afford to pay rent—two or three families at a time.”

“That’s enough!” I say, reaching for Juanita’s hand and kissing each one of her stubby little fingers until her frown is replaced by a smile.

After I take Juanita home, I think about what she said about me being selfish. Maybe Juanita’s got a point. Yet I can’t help but wish things could stay like they’ve always been at home.