

Skipping Stones Honor Book and Tejas Star Book Award Finalist



# THE RUIZ STREET KIDS

DIANE  
GONZALES  
BERTRAND

# **The Ruiz Street Kids**

**Diane Gonzales Bertrand**

**Spanish Translation  
by Gabriela Baeza Ventura**



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**To the neighborhood children of  
Ruiz Street and Texas Avenue  
with love**

## Chapter One



### The Boy on the Bike

My big brothers came home with the first stories about a boy named David. They said a boy with reddish hair rode down Ruiz Street on an old green bike. They said he yelled "I'm David, don't mess with me!" He shook his fist at my brothers.

This boy didn't go to our school. No one knew where he lived. He'd appear out of nowhere, ride down Ruiz Street, and yell things at my brothers. Mike and Gabe might have said, "Who cares?" except for something odd. Every time they saw David, he rode a different bike. He had to be stealing them, right? And if he stole bikes, then he stole other stuff too, right? Only a mean kid would do that, right?

About a week after my brothers first saw David, we found a dead possum in our backyard. Everybody agreed David must have left it there. Mike told me, "Joe, that guy's so mean possums drop dead at the sight of him!" And I believed it!

Later that same day I finally saw David for myself. I was walking home from the bakery with



my brothers and sister. I stared open-mouthed at the boy on the bike who was blocking our path.

His short hair looked as if Mama's old scrub brush had cleaned red bricks all day. He had thick lips and a flat, wide nose. He looked like an upside down triangle because of his broad shoulders and narrow, skinny body. His brown skin looked well-tanned from the sun.

David sat upon a bike with a long red seat and dirty white frame. It looked like he had stolen it from a junkyard. He wore a T-shirt with arm holes cut out and faded jeans that were cut ragged just below his knees. He wore no socks inside his dirty hi-tops.

Most of David's weight was balanced against one leg as he sat parked in the alley between the bakery and the flower shop. We were still a block away from our home.

"Get behind me, Joe," Mike said as he yanked me behind him. I was eight, and never moved as fast as my big brothers wanted.

My oldest brother Gabe stepped beside Mike. Our sister Tina moved closer. They formed a body wall between David and me.

"You got sweet bread in that bag? I want some," David said.

Gabe said nothing. He was a quiet guy, thick around the middle, and usually let Mike do the talking. Mike was a year younger, thin and bony. He ran the fastest of all of us.

"We got nothing for you, David," Mike told him. "Get lost."

David straightened up, his legs now firmly planted on both sides of the bike. His eyes squinted at Mike. "I like sweet bread. I want some of yours."

Maybe if Grandma Ruth had been with us, and David looked hungry, he would have gotten a piece of sweet bread. That day David looked mean, not hungry. And those words of Jesus that Sister Arnetta told us in religion class about feeding the hungry just didn't count with David. Mike told us that David stole stuff. Why should we share with him?

Only my big sister, Tina, was the kind of girl who fed stray cats and took care of baby birds that fell out of trees. She loved Sister Arnetta even though everybody else called her "Sister Awful." Tina began to unfold the top of the bag.

"No!" Mike yelled so loud everybody jumped. "We don't need to give David anything. You go buy your own bread. Get lost!"

Mike's voice made me scared. David let his bike flop into the grass. That scared me too. Suddenly David jumped over the bike. He grabbed for the bag in Tina's hands.

"Hey!" Gabe yelled, ready to move now that it looked like Tina could get hurt. Gabe didn't like to start fights, but when it came to me or Tina, he was a bulldog.

David held onto the bag. So did Gabe and Mike. Tina gripped it too. That's when I jumped out from behind them. I kicked David's skinny brown leg as hard as I could.

David yelled and pushed me with his shoulder. I fell against Tina and pulled her long pony tail to try



to break my fall. She cried out and shoved me away. I slipped on the rocks underneath my shoes. I plopped backwards, right into stickers that poked my hands like a million needles. Youch! Tears started as I jumped up. I saw my hands. Stiff brown stickers covered the soft skin on my palms. I cried even louder.

Gabe must have thought that David made me cry. He shoved his hand into David's chin. David slapped at Mike's face. Mike kicked and spit. Tina yelled, "Let go! Let go!"

Everyone made so much noise that no one heard the paper bag rip apart. The bread rolls, the cinnamon cookies, and our breakfast sweet bread – everything dropped on the ground.

David howled with laughter and stomped on one of the rolls. Mike pushed him away. David yelled, "That's what you get!" He jumped back on his bike. He rode down the alley yelling and laughing like everything was funny to him.

"Aw, man," Mike said, as Gabe said, "Oh, no!"

"Joe! You big baby, stop crying!" Tina yelled at me.

"My hands! My hands! I got stickers!" I cried full force – tears, a filled up nose, and choking sounds in my throat. My hands stung. All our good bread lay in the dusty dirt and dry grass of the alley. I cried even louder.

"Come on, we gotta pick this up," Gabe said. He grabbed the bottom of his black T-shirt to make a pouch to carry the sweet bread home. "We should have just given him a piece."

"That's what I was going to do! Mike, why did you have to make David grab the bag?" Tina yelled at them as she grabbed me. She plucked the stickers off my hands. I wailed "ouch" with every one she pulled out. "Joe, stand still!"

"We don't need to share with David," Mike said. He got down on one knee and started picking up the bread pieces. He blew on each one. "He can't just grab what he wants!"

"Everything is dirty," Tina said, picking up her favorite sweet bread, a spiced-bread that was shaped like a pig. She laid it across the torn bag, and picked up another "piggy." "We're going to be in big trouble with Mom."

I tried to pick up some of the cookies, but they crumbled in my sore hands. Tears rolled down my cheeks again. We had dirty bread, I fell in the stickers, and now Mom was going to get mad at us too. This was all David's fault.

We piled up what we could into Gabe's black T-shirt. Tina carried the rest in the torn bag like a basket in her hands. I found a piece of cookie that didn't look too dirty and started to eat it.

"Joseph Silva! You can't eat that! Not until you draw a cross on it. Then the dirt won't hurt you!" Tina told me.

I stared down at the cookie. My face was still wet. My hand was sore. I needed Jesus to keep me safe from a stomachache if I ate a dirty cookie. So I took one finger and drew a crooked cross on the cookie.

"We need to make a lot of crosses on all this bread," Gabe said. "Should we do it now or after we show it to Mom?"

"Well, if we wait and do it later when Mom can watch us, maybe she'll know we're sorry," Tina said.

We started to walk home, but Mike told us, "Wait!"

We turned around. Mike stomped down on the cookie pieces and bread chunks we didn't gather up. "If David comes back, I don't want him to get any of this."

We all stomped and crushed the leftovers into the ground. We walked away after we were all satisfied that there was nothing left but crumbs for the ants.



After we got back from the *panadería*, Gabe, Mike, and Tina described the fight with David as if ten kids instead of one mean boy had attacked us. We all blamed David for what happened.

Mom's brown eyes glowed as she pressed her lips together. She shook her head and grabbed a dishtowel. She told Gabe and Mike, "You should have given that boy some bread. Now we *all* have to eat bread that fell on the dirt."

"Make a cross on it, Mom," I said. "Then it will be okay to eat."

We watched her sigh, then smile. It was *her* words we lived by.

“Just clean it off, make the sign of the cross on it, and eat it,” she would say if we dropped a slice of bread on the floor or if someone knocked potato chips off the plate. “You can’t waste food. It costs too much money,” she’d tell us.

That day Mom made all four of us get a clean dishtowel to wipe off the dirt we could see. We pulled off grass and even a sticker from the bread that David had made us drop. Tina made about a hundred crosses on her spiced bread “piggies” so she could eat one now and one later. I liked when Mom rubbed an ice cube over the tiny red marks the stickers left on my hands. She gave me a kiss and a chunk of sweet bread covered with chocolate sugar. It didn’t have any dirt that I could see.

Gabe and Mike went outside and grabbed their bikes to ride over to the Guerra’s house. They couldn’t wait to tell Albert and Tony about David. The Guerra boys were like another pair of big brothers to me and lived halfway down the block on Ruiz Street.

Tina and I sat on the front porch, eating our sweet bread and sharing drinks from a soda bottle. We were arguing about who had taken the most drinks when we saw a big truck turn into our street. Usually we didn’t pay attention to trucks. Our dad had one for welding jobs. But this truck was painted bright yellow and pulled a long trailer like a yellow box on wheels.

It stopped across the street, two houses away. Old Mr. Flores had died last Christmas and his white house with the flamingo pink porch columns had been vacant for months.

“Look! New neighbors,” I said. “I wonder if they have any kids.”

School had just ended and I wanted my own friend to play with. Gabe and Mike let me play baseball with them and the guys sometimes, but more often all the big guys rode off on their bikes and left me behind. Tina could walk to Aunt Rebe’s house and play with our cousins Diana and Margie. My two little brothers were still babies. I wanted a friend that was my size.

Not long after the big truck parked in front of Mr. Flores’ house, a white mini-van pulled into the driveway. The neighbor’s car was smaller than the blue one Mom drove.

A mom and a dad got out of the front seat. He was short and she was tall. The back door opened and a girl about Tina’s size got out. She had long hair like Tina’s, only this girl’s hair was straight and black. I saw her pull two little girls in matching blue dresses out of the back seat. Girls! Could it get any worse?

Then I saw a boy climb out the back of the van. He jumped to the ground. He lost his balance, and fell back on his bottom.

Tina giggled. “He falls down just like you do!”

I stuck out my tongue at my sister.

Two men in blue uniforms started carrying things out of the trailer and inside the house. We talked about helping them, but the kids and the parents never came back out once they went in. Finally, Mom called Tina inside to care for our baby brothers

while she started supper. That left me alone to watch what happened across the street.

I sat and watched the men move furniture into the house. I sat there so long that Gabe and Mike had come back, Dad had come home from a welding job, and I was hungry for supper.

“Joe, come inside,” Mom called just when I saw the boy come back outside. He had black hair like I did. From where I sat, he looked my size. I stood up on the porch steps and just stared at him. He stood on his porch and stared at me.

Finally, he raised his hand, like we do in school if we want to ask a question. I raised my hand too. He wore a striped T-shirt and blue shorts. He wasn’t barefoot like me, but wore white socks and shiny black shoes. He started walking down the sidewalk. I came down the steps. I wondered if he could come across the street. Was his mom like mine? She always said, “Stay in the yard where you can hear me call.” How I wanted to run around Ruiz Street like my brothers did!

First, I needed a bike that didn’t have a flat tire every day. I also wanted a friend to ride beside me. Did this new boy have a bike? I knew he had some beds, a sofa, a bookshelf, a refrigerator, and a piano. I still hadn’t seen any toys.

By now, the boy had moved on the other side of the yellow trailer. I could only see his shoulders and legs.

“Joe? It’s time for supper!”

I ran out to the end of the sidewalk. I wanted to see what the kid really looked like. I stopped at the

curb. We seemed to be the same size. His legs and arms were brown like mine. Then I looked closer. The boy had *slanted* eyes. Did he even speak English?

He gave a little bow. His black hair was short and shiny. Then he said, "Ki!"

"Hi!" I yelled back.

He bowed again and said, "Ki!"

"Hi!"

"Ki!"

"Hi!"

We did this back and forth about six times and finally I said, "Joe. My name is Joe."

He just bowed and said, "Ki!"

I scratched my head and stared at him.

"Joe! My name is Ki!"

"Oh! Your name is Ki!" I laughed at our silly mix up. I pointed at Ki at the same time I grabbed my stomach. Suddenly, I wobbled off the curb. My bare feet did a falling hop into the street. I crumpled down on one knee. Small stones on the black asphalt near the curb poked me, but it didn't hurt much. Not like those stickers had.

I plopped back and sat on the curb. I smiled at Ki. He sat down on the curb on his side of Ruiz Street. He smiled at me. Ki looked so small next to the big yellow trailer.

Tina called out the front door. "Joe! Come inside now! Mom says!"

I groaned. Who wanted to eat with a new boy to talk to? I stood up. "I need to go inside. Can we play later?" I called out to Ki.

"Sure," he called back. He stood up and waved at me.

I raised my hand, but something out of the corner of my eye grabbed my attention. I looked down the street at the boy riding a blue bike. I knew it was David, and my brothers were right. He wasn't riding that old white bike with a red seat anymore. He rode a blue one with a horn on the handlebars. He honked it over and over again.

Would that mean boy David remember that I had kicked his leg? Without my big brothers around, I got scared. I screamed at Ki, "Run!"

He squinted his slanted eyes. "What?"

"Run!" I yelled, and I did just that. My little legs moved faster than I had ever ran before. My feet hardly touched the patchy grass in the yard. I didn't even know when I got to the sidewalk. But I was so glad when I pulled open the screen door to our house.

I didn't look behind me until it slammed closed. I latched the silver hook. Only then did I stare outside. Through the hazy gray view of a screen door, I saw that Ki hadn't run at all. He had just stepped behind the trailer. I could see his little brown face peeking around the corner.

David honked that squawking horn the whole time he rode down Ruiz Street. He never saw Ki hiding behind the trailer. Once David had turned the corner, I saw Ki's legs running alongside the trailer, until he also disappeared inside his house. At least my new friend was safe, safe from that boy David.