

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL SERIES

Zakiya's Enduring Wounds



Gloria L. Velásquez

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In memory of our beloved friend
and spiritual advisor,
Rev. Father Kenneth Brown, VP
1949-2016

ONE

Zakiya

“Thanks for the ride, Mrs. Martin,” I say as I slam the car door shut.

“No problem, Zakiya, you and Peyton played great today.”

Waving back to Peyton and her mom as they drive away, I hurry across the street to our apartment. The moment I open the door, I can smell Momma’s fried chicken. Setting my gym bag down, I glance at Jerome sitting on the floor playing his obnoxious video games. “Is Dad home?” I ask, only he’s so involved in his game that he ignores my question. I’m about to yell at him when Momma pokes her head out of the kitchen.

“Did you win this time?” she asks, sounding critical like always. I don’t know why Momma can’t be sweet like Dad. He never acts pissy with me about anything, but not Momma, all she seems to do is complain. And she doesn’t even know the slightest thing about volleyball.

“We lost, but we won two out of three in the tournament.”

Just then, Dad walks into the living room. “How’s my Zee baby today?” he asks, moving closer so I can give him a hug and a kiss. Ever since I can remember, Dad’s called

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me his Zee baby and the nickname has stuck. Jerome's constantly making snide remarks about me being Daddy's little girl. I guess maybe he's right after all.

Hanging his jacket in the closet, Dad orders Jerome to turn off the TV. Jerome is about to complain, but the scowl on Dad's face makes him hesitate, so instead he disappears to his room.

"Zakiya, time to set the table," Momma hollers from the kitchen.

I stare helplessly at Dad. "I have to take a shower," I plead with him. "I smell really bad."

Sniffing several times, Dad says, "You go on—I'll take care of it."

"Thanks, Dad." I smile, pick up my gym bag and head for the stairs.

In my bedroom, I search through my dresser for a pair of warm jogging pants and a matching T-shirt. Then I go into the small bathroom that I share with Jerome and my older brother, Tyrone. It's always cluttered and messy. Tyrone leaves all his shaving stuff scattered on the counter, but the worst part is that I have to remind Jerome about a hundred times a week to put the toilet seat down. I can hardly wait until we have our own house. Maybe then we'll have two bathrooms. Dad and Momma have been saving money for years. Dad heard about this program in Laguna where they help low-income families build their own homes. It's always been Momma's dream to have our own backyard where she can plant a garden with flowers and vegetables. Dad's always bringing her flowers from Discount Foods. He likes to tease Momma that she's his queen. One day I'll marry a man just like my dad.

Once I've showered and dressed, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I wonder why I had to look like Momma with my big round eyes and fat cheekbones. The only thing I really like is my nose. It's not too big or too small. Somebody once told me it was perfectly shaped. Dad's always telling Momma she's the most beautiful woman in the world. He says I look just like her, so maybe I'm not so bad after all. If only I weren't so tall. I'm the tallest girl on the volleyball team, which is a good thing, still it seems like a lot of guys go for girls who are shorter. But Peyton insists I have nothing to worry because I have "long, sexy legs."

By the time I come back downstairs for dinner, everyone is already seated at the kitchen table, even Tyrone. Sometimes he can't make it for dinner because of a class, but Momma makes sure to save him a plate of food. It's Tyrone's first year at Laguna University. He's working on a Social Sciences degree so he can become a counselor. Ever since Tyrone worked at the Teen Center, he says he wants to be like Mr. G. and help others.

"Sure took you a long time," Jerome complains, as I sit next to Tyrone. His plate is piled high with mashed potatoes and gravy. I'll never understand how he can eat that much and stay so thin. Guess he took after Dad and I took after Momma, big and bulky.

While I serve myself two pieces of fried chicken, I ask Tyrone, "How are your classes—any cute guys?"

Ignoring my question, Tyrone describes the project they're working on in one of his classes. From the corner of my eye, I can see Momma's face light up. Tyrone will be the first one in our family to graduate from a university. Dad graduated from high school while Momma only went

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to eighth grade. One time I heard Dad bragging to one of his customers about how Tyrone was going to be a real professional and not work in a grocery store like him.

“What about you?” Tyrone asks, serving himself a second helping of mashed potatoes and gravy. “What’s up at ol’ Roosevelt?”

“Everything’s cool. I’m gonna join the dance troupe next semester.”

“With that clunky body?” Jerome asks. The facetious grin on his face makes me want to slap him.

Dad quickly comes to my defense, telling Jerome to mind his own business. I’ll never understand why I have to have a snotty twelve-year-old brother like him. Why can’t he act more like Tyrone? Tyrone’s always been kind and considerate, but not Jerome. He’s a punk, always making fun of me and my friends.

Shoving the last bit of mashed potatoes in his mouth, Tyrone pushes back his chair. “Sorry, Momma,” he apologizes. “I have to attend a lecture this evening—have to run now.”

“Better hurry, son,” Dad tells him as he bends down to give Momma a kiss on the cheek.

“You go on now. We’ll take care of the dishes,” Momma tells him as he exits the kitchen.

Momma’s constantly catering to Tyrone and Jerome, but I know if it were me who had to rush out, she wouldn’t act the same way. Peyton said her mom’s also like that with her older brother, that she babies and treats him like he’s a king.

When we’re done eating, Dad orders Jerome to help me with the dishes while he and Momma go into the living

room to watch TV. Dad always massages Momma's feet while they watch the evening news, you'd think they were newlyweds, the way Dad gushes over Momma. But I guess that's better than arguing. Peyton says her parents have heated fights and one time her dad even moved out for a month. I've never told her about how Dad left Momma when his drinking got bad. But he came back home and has been going to A.A. since then. There're so many students at school whose parents are divorced and I'm just grateful to have both parents. I wouldn't trade them for a million bucks.

I can tell Jerome is pissed about having to dry the dishes for Tyrone because he splashes water all over the counter. I'm about to get started on the pots and pans, when Jerome flings the dishtowel on the counter.

"I'm out of here—I have tons of homework."

"Liar!" I call out, as he hurries out the kitchen. I know he just wants to go upstairs to watch stupid skater videos. *But what do I care, anyway?* I can get the dishes done faster without him.

I'm reaching for Momma's favorite wrought-iron skillet, when Dad walks back into the kitchen. "Need some help?" he asks, picking up a clean dishcloth.

"Thanks, Dad. That lazy Jerome quit on me."

"That's what I figured—so how's volleyball? I hope it isn't taking too much time from your homework?"

Dipping the silverware into the soapy water, I smile up at him. "No, it's not. I can get a lot done during study hall."

"That's real fine because I want you to get into the university like your brother did. Be somebody."

“Well, I’m gonna be a dancer,” I say, drying my hands quickly. “Wanna see one of my dance moves?”

Before he can reply, I start to do one of my dance routines, my hands swaying to the rhythm of my body. Smiling, Dad begins to clap just as Momma comes walking into the kitchen.

“What’s all the commotion here?” she asks in a loud, obnoxious voice.

“Zee baby thinks she knows how to dance, but she doesn’t know nothing.”

The next thing I know Dad pulls Momma into his arms and they start to waltz around the kitchen as if they were in a huge ballroom. Momma’s face is flushed by the time they come to a halt. His handsome face beaming with pride, Dad confesses, “There was a time when your momma and I used to be the best ones on the dance floor.”

“Those were some good days, weren’t they, Jerry?” Momma grins and says, “Now, why don’t I help Zakiya finish up here?”

“Margaret, you mind your own business,” Dad says, insisting Momma go back into the living room.

Dipping my hands back into the soapy water, I ask gently, “Dad, why didn’t you go to college?”

“I wanted to,” he admits, his voice low and soft. “But there never seemed to be enough money. Seems like my daddy was always struggling to put food on the table.”

“What about Momma?”

“Her parents were poor too, and she had to help take care of her younger brothers and sisters. Your momma was the smart one. When I met her, all she did was read. She loved poetry—Langston Hughes was her favorite. Then

after we got married and the babies started coming . . . it was just too hard for her to go to school. But you and Tyrone are gonna make us both very proud.”

I dry my hands as fast as I can and reach out to embrace him. “I’m the one who’s proud of *you*, Dad,” I whisper “You’re the best father in the world.”

TWO

Zakiya

As the bus pulls up to the stop, I think back to how freaked out I was last year. It was my freshman year at Roosevelt and I wondered how I was going to find my way around such a huge campus. It's a good thing I had a nice friend like Dalana so that I wouldn't feel like I was the only black girl around. This year I love being a sophomore, feeling big and bad compared to those wimpy freshman. I've made lots of new friends on the volleyball team like Peyton. And even though she's white, we have a lot in common. We both have older brothers and we both like hip-hop. Though I have to admit, it was a little weird the first time I went to Peyton's house, the way her parents stared at me. I've often heard Mom and Dad talking about how different white people are, but Peyton's parents turned out to be super nice, after they stopped staring.

Peyton is waiting for me near the steps to the main quad like she does almost every morning. "Don't look, but Carlos is checking you out again," she says, her small blue eyes glittering.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Carlos standing by the Science building talking to another guy. He is definitely

staring at me. My heart does several flip flops. Carlos is in my Spanish class and he just moved here from the Bay area. He is such a hunk with his wavy, black hair and the most gorgeous green eyes I've ever seen.

As we head for our lockers, I tease Peyton, "Are you sure he's not checking *you* out?" If anyone is always checking guys out, it's her. That's all she ever talks about. Not that I don't check out guys myself, but she seems obsessed with having a boyfriend. Peyton's short and skinny—she's always telling me I'm lucky 'cause guys go for girls with good-sized boobs like mine.

My first class of the day is English, which I really like because this semester we're reading poetry. Mrs. Harrison doesn't get carried away with analyzing rhyme or technique. She likes to focus on the message of the poem and how it relates to what is happening in society today. Another thing I really like about her teaching is that we don't just read the famous white poets like that Whitman guy. Last week we read Maya Angelou's poetry and next week we're reading Ntozake Shange—I've never even heard of her.

As soon as second period ends, I rush out the door for my favorite class of the day—performing arts. It's way over in the gym and it takes me a while to get there, only I could care less. I love to dance and I love any kind of movement. Momma always complains that when I was a little girl, she could never keep me still for very long. But Dad's eyes light up as he tells stories about how I would dance around the room like a swan any time music was playing.

By the time I've changed into my black yoga pants, Dalana has saved a spot for me on the gym floor. We've

been best friends since junior high, so we always sit together. Today Mrs. Jessup spends the entire period lecturing on technique. When a girl raises her hand to ask why we have to warm-up before we begin to dance, she talks about body placement and alignment. She emphasizes that without the correct warm-ups we can hurt our muscles. Dalana giggles when I tell her, “I’d like to hurt Jerome, give him a smack sometime, he’s a pain in the ass.”

After Biology, I hurry to meet Peyton at the snack cart. Then we find a quiet spot over by the multi-purpose room where we can eat our lunch in peace. Sometimes Dalana joins us, but lately it seems like she’s always got some kind of project for her robotics class. It’s either that or she’s having lunch with Moses. They’ve become really good friends since they realized they have fathers who are in prison. Dalana always sounds so cheerful when she talks about visiting her dad at the prison. As for me, I can’t ever imagine not having my dad around. I mean, I can because we went through it when he was drinking a lot, but he came back. Dalana’s dad isn’t coming home anytime soon.

As I bite into my ham sandwich, Peyton reaches for her phone to show me her new love interest. “His name is Tanner. He’s so hot—he’s a senior at San Martin High.”

“He’s cute,” I agree, noticing his black and white letterman jacket.

“He’s on the football team.”

“Cool,” I tell her.

Slipping her phone back into her pocket, Peyton says, “No volleyball today. Want to go downtown?”

“I better not since I didn’t let Momma know.” Peyton and I love to go downtown to all the stores. Laguna has the

most expensive clothing stores in the area. Peyton and I will spend hours checking out cute tops and jeans. Sometimes we try clothes on just for the heck of it even though we don't have any money to buy anything.

"How about a ride home, then?" she asks. "I can text Alan to pick us up."

"Cool—then I won't have to ride that stupid bus." Alan is Peyton's brother and a senior this year. Peyton will often coax him into giving us a ride home after school. I remember the first time Alan dropped me off at my apartment. I felt slightly embarrassed because they live in a big house in an upscale neighborhood. But I didn't let it get to me. Besides, I love my family. And like Dad's always saying, one day he's gonna buy Momma her dream house.

My last period of the day is beginner Spanish. I really like the teacher, Mr. Villamil, but I'm always on edge since Carlos is in that class. When Mr. Villamil instructs us to pair up and practice the textbook exercises with the verb "gustar," Carlos is suddenly at my side. "Let me hear your *español*." He smiles, taking the empty chair next to me.

My palms feel sweaty and my heart is beating fast like a conga drum. "This must be easy for you," I stammer.

"Yeah, it's fun." His green eyes draw me in like a magnet.

"Do you speak Spanish at home?"

Shaking his head, Carlos says, "Mostly with my grandparents, who are from Mexico. I can speak it, but I never learned to write it, that's why I'm in this class. Ever since I was little my grandma used to always speak Spanish to us. I'm kind of glad she did."

"That's nice," I tell him.

Just then, Mr. Villamil, who is now circulating the room, pauses at our side. Carlos focuses his eyes on the exercises. “¿Te gusta bailar?” he asks.

“Sí, yo me gusto bailar,” I answer, and Mr. Villamil takes a moment to correct me.

As soon as he’s out of distance, Carlos switches back to English, “I hear you’re a very good dancer.”

“I love to dance,” I reply, feeling excited to find out he’s been asking about me. I wonder if Peyton’s right, that he does like me. All I know is he’s the hottest guy on campus.

“Do you dance any *cumbias*?” he asks with a sly grin.

“What’s that?”

A huge smile spreads across Carlos’ brown face and I wonder if I’ve said something stupid. When Mr. Villamil signals for everyone to return to their seats, I do my best not to stare as Carlos stands up, wishing we could talk more.

After school, Peyton and I sit on the steps near the bus stop to wait for Alan. When Peyton puts on a music video, I stand up and begin to sway back and forth to the rhythm. Shaking her head, Peyton sighs, “If only I could dance like you.”

“Come on, I’ll show you,” I say, grabbing her hand just as Alan pulls up to the curb in his red Honda.

“You’re late,” Peyton scolds Alan as we both climb into the car.

Alan apologizes, “Sorry, we had a meeting about our senior project.” Glancing toward the back seat, he says, “Hey, Zakiya, some hot dance moves there.”

Thanking him, I smile to myself, remembering how Alan’s always saying that white people don’t have any

rhythm. As he drives out of the parking lot, I lean forward to ask, "Would you mind dropping me off at Discount Foods? I think I'll surprise Dad."

"Sure thing," Alan says while Peyton turns up the radio, drowning out his voice.

When they drop me off at Discount Foods, I head straight toward the back, waving at Maureen, the red-headed checker who has been Dad's friend since I was in junior high. The second Dad sees me, he comes out from behind the seafood counter where he's just finished waiting on a customer. With a look of surprise on his face, he asks, "Zee baby, what are you doing here?"

"No volleyball today so Peyton's brother gave us a ride. Thought I'd surprise you."

Last month Dad was promoted to Seafood Manager. I've never seen Momma so excited. She made Dad this huge dinner with gumbo, red beans and rice. All they talked about was how much sooner they'd be able to save up for a house. I swear there were tears in Dad's eyes when Momma made us raise our water glasses to make a toast. Jerome almost ruined it when he made an idiotic wisecrack about wishing it were wine. Ever since Dad's been in A.A., that's something we should never joke about in the house.

Once Dad has clocked out, he puts on his jacket and we make our way to the front of the store. Maureen, who has a long line of customers, manages to holler out, "So they're checking up on you, Jerry?"

His lips parting, Dad waves back. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

On the drive home, Dad asks me loads of questions about my classes. When I tell him I got an A on my poetry

essay, his face lights up. “Zee, you’re not just pretty like your momma, but you’re smart too!”

“Thanks, Dad.” I smile back, asking him if I can turn the radio on, knowing that he always lets me have my way. When hip-hop comes on, Dad sticks his left arm up in the air as if he’s dancing. We both start to giggle as we dance in our seats all the way back to the apartment. I suddenly find myself wishing we lived hours away so I could spend more time alone with him, so I could have him all to myself before Momma commands all his attention.