

WHERE THERE IS HOPE
School Children in Exile
Sue Hutchinson
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My name is Rosita and I am 4 years old. I love to sing and I love my dog, Peso, but, mostly, I love celebrations. When there are celebrations, my whole family sings and claps and laughs together. My papa says he can see “stars shining in our eyes” when my mama and I sing. My birthday is my favorite celebration because it is a day just for me; it is August 25, near the end of the summer...the perfect time for a celebration. My family sings and plays games and gives me a special present. It is a wonderful day that makes me feel warm inside.

But, this year my birthday was not a happy day. When papa came home from work, his eyes were sad and he told us he lost his job. My mama cried. We had my birthday celebration, but no one wanted to sing or dance. Mama and Papa smiled sometimes, but I could tell they were pretending. I watched when they didn't know and I could see the sadness in their faces. It took a long time for me to get to sleep that night. Why did Papa's job have to spoil my birthday? I didn't understand why everyone was so sad. Couldn't papa just get another job and make everyone happy again?

This morning Mama and Papa call us into the kitchen. Papa says to hurry because he has some “big news.” He tells us he has not been able to find a job near our home, but that he's been talking to his friends and has written my Uncle Miguel in America. They say that in America there are many jobs and people can make lots of money if they work hard. Then Papa tells us he is leaving tomorrow for America with some men from his old job. When he finds a job and a place for us to stay, he will send for us to come, too. My big brother, Eduardo, starts to cry; Mama puts her arms around him and tears fall slowly down her cheek. I don't understand what is happening and I feel all mixed up inside. Peso rubs against my leg and looks up at me as if he can't understand either. I rub his favorite spot under his chin and tell him everything will be OK.

It's been four months since Papa left. He called yesterday to say he is renting a trailer and he has a job at a big plant in America. So, we must say goodbye to everyone in Mexico. Last night we ate at my Grandmother's house and all my cousins were there. It wasn't like a celebration at all. Almost everybody cried when it was time for us to go. The worst part was leaving Peso with my cousin, Alberto. Mama says he is too old for us to take to America and they probably won't allow dogs on the bus. She says he will be happier to stay in Mexico because it is his home. I think I know how Peso feels.

We ride on the bus for three whole days. Sometimes I sleep or play with my doll, Chalina, but mostly I look out the window and try to imagine what it will be like living in a new place. Finally Mama says the next stop is ours. As we get close to the station, Eduardo and I push against the window to look for Papa in the crowd of people waiting outside. It is so wonderful to see him! Papa lifts me in his arms and squeezes me tight and then swings me around and around as though he is dancing without music.

It seems funny to have a trailer instead of a house. Eduardo and I share a room and things are pretty crowded, but I like to have him to talk to when I go to sleep at night. There are other trailers in our park and lots of children to play with. It has been easy to make friends with the children who live close to me; many of them are from Mexico, too. But, when we go to the grocery store or Wal-Mart, I feel strange. Many of the people there speak differently and I don't know what they are saying. Sometimes people smile at me, but others look at my family and frown or just turn their heads and look away.

One day when Papa comes into the kitchen after work, he is hiding a surprise behind his back. He says it is something he found outside the plant and no one wanted it. Eduardo and I try to peek, but Papa says we must close our eyes and stand very still. I can't imagine what he is hiding, but soon I feel something furry brush my cheek and something cold and wet lick my nose. I can't keep my eyes closed any longer! It is a tiny puppy! He is white with black and brown spots and VERY wiggly. Papa puts him into my lap and I squeal out loud. Papa says my cousin, Jose, thinks we should name the puppy Uncle Sam. He says it's a perfect name for our new American dog. There must be some joke about it that I don't understand because Jose and Papa laugh every time they say it. I don't think it's so funny, but it really doesn't matter. It just matters that now we have a puppy.

Papa says we must have a car, so for now Mama has a job at the plant, too, and Eduardo and I must stay at a center while they are at work. It is close to the plant and lots of children of all ages go there. Some of them speak Spanish, but none of the teachers do. The teacher for my group always seems busy and kind of angry. She doesn't smile very often and she snaps her fingers a lot. She talks to the children who can understand her in a normal voice, but whenever she wants to say something to those of us who don't speak English, she talks very loudly—like if she yells at us, we'll understand her better. That seems pretty stupid to me.

There is not much to do at the center. Many of the toys are broken or have missing pieces. There are some games and books, but they are too hard for me. We can draw one picture a day with crayons; my teacher says there won't be any paper left for the rest of the year if we use more than that. I don't like the center and I don't like having to get up while it is dark so Mama and Papa can get to work on time. I miss my Grandma and I miss Mexico and I want to go home. I don't think people in America like us. Eduardo says he heard some of the teachers at the center say if we can't learn English, we should not be here.

We go to the center every day in the summer. When August comes, I start to count the days until my birthday. Mama and Papa talk about Eduardo and me going to school. Mama says some women at the plant told her that mine is a good school and she thinks I will like it. I'm not so sure. I don't like to meet new people and, even though the finger-snapper at the center is not always nice, at least I know her. Eduardo has to go to a different school because he is 13, so that means I'll have to go alone. I wish Mama could go to school with me.

One day two letters come in the mail from my new school. One is for Mama and Papa and the other one has my name on the outside! It is my first letter in America! I open the envelope carefully and pull out the letter that's inside. Three stickers fall out of the envelope onto the table. One is a ladybug with funny eyes that move, one is a spotted puppy that looks a little bit like Uncle Sam, and the other one is a gold star that sparkles. It is beautiful! Eduardo says I should give one to him, but I say no. Mama says this is a special letter from my new teacher; it is written on yellow paper with crayons of all colors around the edge. My teacher wrote that she is happy to have me in her class. I really love the stickers; I've seen them at the grocery store before, but I've never had any of my own. I put them in a special box in my room until I can decide just how to use them.

Two days later the phone rings and I hear Mama trying to speak English, although I can't understand much of what she is saying. When she hangs up, she sits down beside me and smiles. "Guess who is coming to visit, Rosita?" she asks. I can't guess, so Mama has to tell me. "Your new teacher," she says, "and we have lots of cleaning to do!" My teacher is coming to see me? I didn't know teachers did that! We work hard to get the trailer looking nice; Mama puts some Cokes in the refrigerator so my teacher can have one when she comes.

Mama says my teacher will visit today after she and Papa get home from work. I play outside and watch for her. I wonder what she will look like. I wonder if she snaps her fingers. After a while, a car pulls up to our trailer and two women get out. They walk toward me and one talks to me in Spanish. She asks if my name is Rosita and, when I answer "Si," she says, "This is your new teacher." She points to the tall woman beside her. The tall woman bends down on her knees close to me and smiles. She says, "Ola, Rosita," and hands me a little plastic bottle. She reaches over and carefully opens the lid. When she blows thru the circle at the bottom, beautiful bubbles fly everywhere! She hands the lid back to me and smiles. The other woman says the bubbles are a gift for me from my teacher.

I run to the door and call for Mama and Papa to come. I show them the bubbles and they invite my teacher and the lady inside. The grown-ups talk for a few minutes and I watch them closely. My teacher smiles when she talks, even though her Spanish words sound pretty funny. She and Mama look so different sitting beside each other on the sofa. My Mama's hair is black and her skin is a beautiful brown. My teacher's hair is the color of the silk on corn before it ripens and her skin is almost white. But their smiles are the same and I'm glad they seem to like each other.

While the other lady talks with Mama and Papa, my teacher comes to sit with me. She takes a camera out of her bag, smiles at me, and asks something I don't understand. She points to me and then to the camera and I think she is asking if she can take my picture. I smile and nod my head and she moves a little closer and holds the camera in front of her face. I don't hear anything, but my teacher smiles and holds the back of the camera so I can see. There's me! She points to the camera again and then to Uncle Sam and I nod to her. She hands me the camera and together we look at the back. When we can see Uncle Sam in the little window, my teacher pushes a button on the top of the camera. And, there is Uncle Sam frozen on my teacher's camera! After my teacher and the other lady leave, Papa sits at the kitchen table and reads all the papers they brought. Sometimes he laughs quietly to himself and I hear him tell Mama that the school's translations aren't always right, but "At least," he says, "they are trying. No one else has done that." When he finishes reading, Papa tells me that all of us get to visit my new school next week. I wonder what it will be like?

When the evening comes for us to go to my school, I am so excited I can hardly stand still. The school is a big building with lots of windows. I can see a playground on one side of the school as we drive into the parking lot; I hope I'll get to play there sometimes. We walk down a long hall to my classroom. On the door is a big yellow bus with pictures of children riding inside it. "Look, Rosita! There's you!" says Eduardo, and he's right. I see the picture my teacher took when she came to our trailer and there beside me in the bus is Uncle Sam, the picture my teacher and I took together. I whisper to Eduardo that I really like this class and I haven't even seen the inside yet. As we walk through the door, I can't believe how beautiful the room looks. It is bright and full of colors...and there are so many things to do! We walk around the room and see blocks and puzzles and books and a place to paint and paper--LOTS of paper--and markers of every color in the world. There are dress-up clothes and two skirts that look like ones Mama wears. There are pictures on the walls and on the sides of the cabinets; some have children with white skin like my teacher and some have families that look like they might be from Mexico. There is a special place just for me with my name and picture; Papa says it is where I will hang my coat and keep my things. My teacher comes over and smiles as she talks to our family. She gives Mama and Papa a paper about school and a nametag for me to wear on the first day. Papa thanks her for trying to translate the papers into Spanish for us. I don't understand what my teacher is saying all the time, but it doesn't matter. I can tell by her smile that she likes me. I think Mama's friends at the plant were right about this school.

I can't believe what has happened! Since the first day of August, I have been counting the days until my birthday...until MY big celebration. But, Mama says school begins today! I want to go to my new school, but NOT TODAY! Birthdays shouldn't be school days! But, Mama says I have to hurry; the bus will be here soon. She pins the nametag from my teacher on my shirt and hands me the green school bag Grandma made before we left Mexico. Mama is going to work late today so she can walk with Eduardo and me to meet the school bus. We stand at the end of the lane and my stomach feels funny. I wish Uncle Sam could ride with me, like he does in the bus on my classroom door. We see the yellow bus coming down the hill and Mama hugs me tightly and says, "Happy Birthday, Rosita. Have a wonderful first day of school." Some celebration day this will be. No one at school even knows it's my birthday.

The bus arrives at school and suddenly I'm scared. How will I find my class? When I came with Mama and Papa, they took me to the room. I didn't watch to see how we got there! I wonder if anyone will be able to understand me if I ask for help? Soon a lady with black hair gets on. She looks at my nametag and smiles. She takes my hand and walks with me and some other children into the big school and down the long hall to my class. As we walk, she tells us in Spanish about the rooms in the school. There is a big gym and a room where we will eat lunch. Soon I can see the door with the bus and the pictures of Uncle Sam and me and I start to feel better. There is a flag outside my room that wasn't there when we came last week. It is blue with red and yellow balloons and a pink cake. There is a piece of paper pinned to the bottom; I can't read the words on it, but the last one starts with an R like my name. The bus lady looks at it and then looks again at my nametag. "Rosita, is today your birthday?" she asks. I smile and nod my head as we walk into the room together. I see my teacher talking with two other children. When we walk toward her, she looks at me and smiles. "Ola, Rosita," she says, "felices cumpleaños." She tapes a round paper birthday cake onto the bottom of my nametag. It has more of those gold sparkly stars all around the edge; it is so beautiful! She calls all the children together on the big blue rug and, as they sing, she puts her arm around me and points to my birthday cake badge. She sings words I don't understand, but then, in the same tune, she sings "felices cumpleaños" in words I know very well. As my teacher sings and smiles and claps, I think I can see my birthday stars shining in her eyes, just like my Papa sees when Mama and I sing. This IS a celebration, a celebration just for me, and I feel warm inside. I wonder how she knew...