

Chapter 6. Rosa's Story

My life is a life that is full of good luck. When I said this to Elena, she agreed about this idea with me. My life is simple but not hard, as it could be, and has had many happy moments in it with more to come, I am sure. I have a very special husband. I have healthy children. I have an *americana* for a best friend. I have many blessings that others do not.

I will always remember as extra special the year Elena came to live with us. It was the same year my middle child, Fernando, my sixth, was born. My two birth sisters were well fed and without illness and, if you count Elena as one of us, like I did, then we were four sisters living happily together that year here in Linda Vista. After a too wet winter with much chill, Elena's arrival was a good omen. The time she spent with us was a good time, with a fine harvest and pleasant weather and much to do and talk about together. The year of Elena was a fine year.

I most enjoy the years, or the days in the years, when something different than what is ordinary happens. So you can imagine how fun and unusual it was to find a gringa walking toward my house that first day. It was clear from all of her huffing and sucking for air that she was not accustomed to walks into the mountains, nor did she look at first to have the constitution for the effort, as small and as fragile as she appears. On her first visit I invited her in and made her a glass of lemonade. I kept refilling her glass with the juice from the lemons my husband Hernando grows in the grove beside the house. I have a memory of going out for more lemons at least five times—or maybe six times—before Elena stopped drinking. I knew right from the beginning that she would be a good friend to me because she let my children climb on her lap and we smiled in a sweet way back-and-forth at each other while she drank and drank. Always she said in a kind way, when she finished one glass, that she was very sorry for the imposition but please could she have some more. When I said after the sixth glass that there were plenty of lemons but no more sugar she drank that last glass slowly. I liked her right then because I know what the lemonade without the sugar tastes like, but she did not reveal the horrible sourness. She only said in a most polite manner, “Thank you very much, my thirst is now gone and I do not need any more lemonade.”

Lemonade is a simple thing to make. I do not know what I do that makes it so, but everyone says that my lemonade is the best. It is how I first won the affection of Elena and also, before her's, of my husband.

Hernando and I grew up together and spent three or four years studying every day in the same schoolhouse as children. But children do not generally notice each other and I can remember nothing remarkable about him from all those years. Then there was some time after that when I was in my home helping my mother and he was in the field assisting his father. We did not see each other hardly at all in those years. It was not until I became a young woman, and began to have eyes that noticed boys, that I really saw him again for the first time. It was in the year and at the time that my parents died of the cough.

Because I was the youngest I was still living in my parents' home and the task of tending to them fell to me. They had been sick for some time, with my sisters' husbands doing the work in the field that my father could not accomplish. I kept the house and did what I could to make my parents comfortable, but the cough is too much for one young woman to prevent. Finally, seeing that their health only continued to worsen, my eldest sister took the coins she had saved for the year and gave them to her husband to buy some beef fat with. It is said that beef fat and sugar water can cure the cough, but we had no beef to make fat with in our village, so my brother-in-law went off our mountain with his youngest brother, Hernando, to find the cure for my parents' cough.

If it had not been that the bandits got Hernando and his brother in the hills below our village, and beat them black and purple and took my sister's money, then maybe my parents would not have died. But instead the bandits got them, and they lay there in the road for a day until they could walk. Then they walked to town slowly and had to spend too much time begging until someone gave them what they needed for free. So by the time they climbed back up the mountain to our village in their painful manner, my parents had already died and we had their bodies prepared for the burial.

So it could have been a very sad occasion when Hernando and I met again for the first time. He was very bruised and in much pain, and my parents were dead and I was an orphan. But because I was already moving my belongings to my sister's house I was there when he arrived with his brother, who is my sister's husband, and I assisted in the

care of these two men who arrived too late to be of use. I do so like to take care of people with what have been called my gentle hands, and I helped to wet the rags and remove the blood stains and tend their wounds. I also was instructed to make some lemonade to soothe their parched throats. Later when we were married I said to my husband that when I first put my hand on his beaten arm that day I knew he would be my husband. And he replied to me that he knew this same thing after I pressed that first delicious glass of lemonade to his lips. So even though it was a time of sadness at the loss of my parents, I had much new feeling and excitement in tending to the body of Hernando.

I said to Elena that only God knows why it is I have been so much more lucky to have found such a good husband when she is so very unlucky and is still all alone. I pray every night to God that He will shine a blessing on her as He has on me, and end this great burden of aloneness that has been laid upon her. Even at the difficult times in my life God has been good to me and answered my prayers. You see how He sent me Hernando to turn my attention from the death of my parents. It was an odd blessing the way the circumstance occurred for me, but it made it easier for us to make our decision to wed.

When my sisters met the men who would be their husbands there was a long period of getting to know each other. Also, they had to wait to see if all the parents approved. First, my parents and the parents of the boy had to meet and discuss at great length all the good qualities of their children. Then it took some time to accumulate the means to offer the gifts from the boy's family to my family. During all this time my sisters had to wait, not seeing the men who would be their husbands unless the boys came to visit our father to bring a tool or a chicken or something to demonstrate their abilities and their good nature. Only when our father agreed to the marriages could they stand in each other's company on the porch or walk in the road, and then finally they were allowed to come together.

For me and Hernando, though, it was different. We were in each other's company much during the time of his recuperation as I was the only one in the family without children and therefore had the time to attend to the men's wounds. Also, with my parents dead so suddenly and everyone's minds on other things we were often left alone and

became sure of our intentions quickly. One day, after spending much time telling me about his experiments with oranges and lemons—cutting the branches from one type of tree and securing them to the trunk of another, so that the many different varieties grew from the same tree!—he also began to brag of his ability with animals and his idea to raise some goats for milk. When he began to tell me of his smart plan for building terraces with stones for structure I told him he could stop crowing about himself like a wild rooster. I said, “You do not need to convince me for I have already decided to become your wife.” This made him smile, and that is all we ever needed to say of that.

It worked well for us that my sister was already married to Hernando’s brother and the families therefore were already known well to each other. Also, with my parents dead it fell to my eldest sister and her husband to approve of Hernando, and of course my brother-in-law approved of his own brother so that went simply. Finally, my parents’ house was empty and already prepared for us to start a family in so we did not need to wait for Hernando to build us a house. Looking back, I think it only took a week or so for everything to get approved instead of many months, and that is how it came to pass that we married even before his skin returned to its normal unbruised color.

My sister spoke a blessing over us on the porch of my parents’ house, under the post where they wed themselves some years before. My mother-in-law wished us fertility and long life, and my father-in-law counseled Hernando to behave as Joseph, the carpenter, who gave his wife and child a good life through the efforts of his own hands. Then we ate the tortillas that my sisters and I cooked and when everyone left I lay with my husband in the room where I was born.

I told Elena that when she finds a husband not to fear the wedding night because the loving is a good part that no one talks about. Until then, I told her, I would share with her my husband in all ways but that one—and she laughed when I said this and said, “Thank you very much, but I am happy to leave the loving to you!”

This is how it must be when a woman has a sister without a husband and without any parents to guard her. The married sister instructs her husband to offer his protection to the unmarried one, so that she will be safe and cared for. My husband did this job well. He built a fence for Elena’s horse and allowed me the extra allowance for more food so that Elena could take her meals with us. Also, he let it be known that he was

responsible for her honor and in this way we assured her safety. It made me very happy to lend her the assistance of my husband, because this is how sisters take care of each other. This is how families measure their love. Mine for Elena is deep.

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I have a photograph of my whole family. It is the most special thing I own. Elena took for us this photograph one day with her small black box called a camera. It is a large-sized photograph with wood all around the edges to keep it safe and I don't know how it came from inside the small black camera box, but Elena says that in truth it did. I keep this photograph hanging always where I can see it, outside when I am outside and inside when I am inside. Even on those days when my children cry too much or roll in the dirt or pick things out from inside their noses, I can look at the picture and it reminds me how lovely they are and how much I do love them.

Not always is it easy to keep the good loving thoughts all throughout every day. I try the best that I can to keep our house and our yard in order so that everything will have a place and be neat and as clean as I can keep it. But oh, six, seven, eight little children all running everywhere at one time can make an orderly house a difficult thing to have! I know that my many children are a blessing and that it is God's rule to have the most that are possible, but sometimes I have to ask the Virgin and the Holy Spirit to remind me how to see the blessing when they have all sat down in mud. Or when they all start to sneeze and cough and make vomit at the same time. Or when there are four that want the milk—who cry loudly for the milk!—and I have only two breasts to give it from at the same time. On those days I have to try very hard to be the good mother I should be.

What I do not have to try hard to do is make the babies. There are some very unfortunate women who do not make very many babies, but Hernando and I make a baby all the time. One baby every year. One baby comes out, another goes in! I am very grateful for this blessing of many babies from God, although I notice that with the more I have the more tired it makes me. That is why, sometimes, there are days when I think I do not have the energy to be a good mother. On those days I stand in front of my photograph and I pray. I keep praying until I can look at my photograph and think,

“Look at my lovely family!” Then when I can do that I know that I will be okay for that day.

Because Elena does not have any children she has more energy sometimes than I do and she is a willing helper so I let her assist me. She can chase after the children and catch them and bring them to me so that all I have to do is bathe one while she runs after the others and for that I am grateful. Sometimes though it confuses me the way Elena behaves with my babies. For one thing, she likes to take the tortilla and break it into small pieces and feed it to the children one tiny piece at a time. A meal with Elena can take a long time to finish! I think that when she has many babies of her own, all hungry, she will see it is easier to give them one large tortilla each to suck on and crawl off with. Also she tries to have her eyes all the time on every child, so sitting with her in peace while they play is not an easy thing. She will jump up and run quickly to bring it back if one steps onto the road or over a hill. Don't you agree it must be that Elena got lost often as a child, and was not returned quickly to her family? For it is as if she does not understand that anywhere the children go someone will recognize them and bring them back to our house after a short while. The one other thing I notice that is very unusual is that Elena always questions me in a nervous way when the boys play with their machetes. She thinks I should take them away, but in what way then would the boys learn what their adult roles will be? I have to say that it makes me sad to realize that poor little Elena must not have had many good things to play with in her childhood, but it also makes me happy that my children have such fortunate lives.

Even though her behavior can sometimes be amusing or odd, Elena is a very kind aunt to my children. She has had good practice. Elena is the oldest of the three children in her own family and it is always the oldest daughter who is the best at taking care of children because of all the care she gives to her younger siblings. After all the siblings grow up, it then becomes the task of the youngest daughter to take care of their parents when they turn old. So that leaves only the middle daughters with the life of ease, but neither Elena nor I would know about that, being the oldest and the youngest like we are. We two understand what it is to work hard for your family.

Because she is a hard worker for family—even for my family which is not her own first family that she was born to—it is difficult to know how it is she could have left

her family behind and come to us all on her own. I have asked her about this question and she has said that in *los Estados Unidos* it is normal for the children to grow up and go far away from their families, but I do not understand how this can be so. I have considered all the problems that would come from going too far away, alone, and there are more problems than I have fingers to count all the problems on.

Hand on the right side:

Thumb: Who will keep you warm on the cold nights, without the whole family to share the bed together? Who will say the prayers for you when you get the cough or the lung rattle from all this cold aloneness?

First finger: Who will collect herbs and boil them and pour the healing juice down your throat while you lie flat in the house, unmoving, with fever? Who will remember that the spicy herb most often used for the lung rattle gives you red itchy bumps and know instead that it is better for you just to have the prayers and the heat cure?

Tallest finger: Who will know that you are cranky when you are sick, and also cranky in the morning during the first hour after waking, and be sure to talk to you only quietly in a small voice during those times?

Next to the last finger: Who will know that chamomile tea is your favorite and have it ready in the cup for you to sip while you awaken? Who will be the one to recall that the cup with the blue trim and no cracks on the rim is your favorite and save it for your use, just as a kindness?

Smallest finger: Who will be aware by the way you push aside your tea—without you ever even having to say a word—that your heart is hurting? Who will set aside their chores and sit with you without needing to talk or question you, just so that you will not be alone in your sadness?

Hand on the left side:

Thumb: Who will rejoice with you when your sadness is relieved? Who will bring you a flower from the field or a lovely found feather to hasten your joy?

First finger: Who will know the stories of your youth, the ones you most love to hear, and tell them again and again in the moments when you most need

to laugh? Who will laugh as you do—with a “snort, snort” like a rutting pig—so that your laugh does not sound strange or awkward but only normal?

Tallest finger: Who will think that you are the smartest or the bravest or the best at some simple task? Who will know that you can make a clover with your tongue, and believe that this is an amazing thing?

Next to the last finger: Who will take your side in a dispute with a neighbor or a shopkeeper, and defend your name against cruel remarks in the street—even, indeed, while arguing privately over some silly concern?

Smallest finger: Who will love your children and give them the breast and raise them to remember you if you die while they are young? Who will be there to say your name fondly when you are gone, if not your family?

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Fernando’s was an easy birth, as the sixth birth should be, as all other things were easy in the year of Elena. It was not at all like my first baby’s birth—now that is the one that was scary and hard! Hernando and I had been married almost a year and though we lived the life of two adults, keeping the house and planting the fields like a man and a woman do, my body was yet that of a girl. It had not before been stretched and bent to the task of mothering, and that made the first the most difficult birth.

My sisters said they would see me through it, and that I should come find them when either thing happened: either the water ran down between my legs, or I got the cramps like from eating a diseased piece of chicken, only without having eaten any chicken at all. I expected that only one or the other of those things would happen, because they said *either* thing, so I got my first shock when the pain started shooting from my front to my back, from my top to my bottom, at the same time that the water dripped out of me. I thought the pain had made me urinate with my clothes on and I felt so embarrassed I went to change, but the stain was not yellow and it did not smell like urine smells and it kept oozing little by little all down my legs. It took me some time to

put on new clothes and find my sisters who were together in a field collecting beans. By then I was in much pain and also very angry.

I fell on the ground when I saw them and I yelled, “You did not tell me it would feel like this, and with the pain and dripping water *both!*”

In a too calm voice, my oldest sister replied, “There are some things that are better left unsaid.”

To her I said back: “And there are some things you say that are not true at all! This is not the pain of eating a diseased chicken part! This is the pain of a diseased chicken dying over and over again inside my belly, with its bony claws and sharp beak STABBING at my insides!” (I still remember how the word STABBING got accompanied by a sharp pain, like a real chicken was in there and poked at me to make my words true, and the word STABBING got shouted so loud it rang out many times in the mountain’s echo.)

For that they made me walk home without any help while they carried their beans. (Beans! What is so important about beans?!) And my oldest sister said as we walked along: “Shh, you must be quiet so you do not scare the young girls! There is nothing wrong with you! Walk normal! This is all normal!”

“Not normal for me!” I shouted, too loud, to make sure they knew how very angry I was with them for what was happening and for them not being more concerned for me than for their beans.

Finally, after a full day of this, back in the house on my bed, they got more concerned. Of course, I am here telling this to you now, so you know I am healthy and also I have forgotten the most terrible part of the pain. For that reason it will probably not sound as scary to you as it was to me then. But in the dark night of the second day, with the candle throwing its shadows around the room and the blood on everything, I was very much frightened. And so were my sisters. Their looks changed by the second night, when they did not turn their eyes to my eyes, which said to me, when I could still focus my attention on such things, that they were more frightened than I. Oh, how I wanted my mother! In the beginning I cried out for her again and again. My one sister sat behind me with her arms wrapped all around me for comfort, while the other waited between my legs, but sisters are not mothers—it is different. My mother was dead and could not help

me anymore. But as the second night grew darker and the shadows got bigger and the blood kept leaving me, I know for sure that my mother came to me. It is as if the pain got lifted and my mother's cool hands stroked my face and brought me rest. My sisters say it is at that time, after too much pushing and with glassy half-dead eyes closing, that I began to whisper over and over, "Let me die" (for it must be that I wanted so much to go away with my mother).

The rest is just a good story now, for I am well and no one died. Also, there are many years now that have passed since that night. Many moons have set and risen again since I moaned, "Let me die," and my eldest sister—who could see from her position between my legs that the baby had decided never to come—took up the knife. When she walked into the room carrying it they say I sat right up and yelled angrily with new energy, "Don't kill me yet!" That is how they knew I would not die, they say now with voices full of laughter. I say now, when teasing, that they should have taken their chance when they had it! But of course all my sister did was to cut open a bigger hole in me, big enough to reach her arm up in and pull the baby out, so that we both could live.

But the sixth birth was not at all like the first, thank you to God and sign of the cross. It was not as bloody. (No need to cut open the mattress afterward and wash the cotton and restuff it with new hay.) Nor was it as painful. (All I needed the knife for this time was to chop off the baby's cord, and because the knife was already right there on the kitchen table next to me where I'd been cutting the avocado I only needed to wipe off the green flesh on my shirt before making the slice.) And it was fast!

I was in the kitchen preparing the lunch, waiting for Hernando to come in from the field and Elena to return from the school with my eldest son. With each child the pains had come faster, but never before and never again did they come in such a hurry. There I was just chopping the avocado for the guacamole like any other day when the water swept out, and when I reached down to check myself I touched the beginnings of a head! I was suddenly afraid that if I went out for help he would get born on the road, in front of my children and the neighbors, so I stayed there in the kitchen by myself. With one hand I pressed to keep his head in, and with the other I moved the avocado onto the ground and climbed up on the table while the labor came. With my skirt still on I gave only maybe ten or twenty hard pushes, without crying out at all, so my babies playing in

the yard would not hear and come in and be frightened. It was hard and fast pain and in trying to be quiet I bit my tongue so my mouth bled, but not my female parts too much. When I knew he was ready to come out I leaned up on one elbow and with my other hand I tried to catch him so he would not slip off the table and smack his head on the ground, and I was very fortunate—he stayed on the table with me. It is also fortunate he came as fast as he did, for I had time to put the baby’s sac in a bowl outside, finish mixing the guacamole, wipe the waters off the table, and set out the plates before my family arrived for lunch. It is my luck that I was smiling and washing a new baby when they all came in to eat, for only a short time before I was bleeding from my mouth and bursting from my bottom on the table where they gathered to take their meal.

It had been decided before by Hernando and me, if she would accept, that Elena should be the godmother of our sixth baby. My other two sisters were already godmothers two times each, and one three times!, but this baby would have his own special new godmother Elena. I assured her he would be a good baby to be the godmother of—a healthy baby—for I had done all the things right, like always. I carried keys in my pocket every day and did not eat any citrus or mango throughout the whole many months, even when I wanted lemonade badly, so he did not slobber excessively or come out with a twisted mouth. We burned the sac right away, and buried it the day he was born right after lunch, so he would grow up to have a normal and not crazy mind. And when the baby’s cord fell off we wrapped it around the handle of an ax and put it in a tree, to give him strength. Because I could promise Elena a good godchild, she said, “Yes, thank you for asking me.” (But she did not say this before inquiring about the responsibilities because, she said, “Rosa, you know I will not be here forever.”) I think about her saying that, sometimes now, and I know she was trying to get me ready. But it was too happy a time to think of something so sad, so I ignored that last part she said and filled up my mind just with the joy of the thing she did for us.

Elena made us a fiesta. I told her there is nothing to do to be the godmother except say yes, but she said that in the United States there is always a fiesta for the baby when the godparents are picked and soon after she left on foot and said, “I will be gone two days—be ready for fun when I get back!” Two days we waited and waited, all the

time wondering, What will happen when Elena returns? Something special maybe, something rare and unusual!

My sisters, too, became excited, and their husbands also. We watched from our porches and sent our children in turns to wait at the curve at the steep end of the road on the edge of Linda Vista, and when they returned to change the shift we would rush out and ask, “Have you seen her yet?”

All the other families noticed our excitement so that soon the whole village was anticipating her return. But always the children said no, she had not yet been sighted on the road, every time we asked, until the end of the second day. The sun was already going down that night when my sister’s second boy ran screaming up the road: “She’s coming! Elena’s coming! With a *truck!*”

You may not believe this, but not only did she return in a truck, but in the truck belonging to our very own mayor of the *municipio!* Elena made the introductions for the very first time ever between our politician the mayor and us his people. We had by then gathered around the truck with many of the men and boys jumping into the back of it when it stopped in the schoolyard. This is not all that she brought us, not just the mayor, but also what she called *un cine*. It showed pictures of people, moving pictures!, of people with strange eyes and very straight hair doing crazy fighting called kung-fu with their hands and their legs. It is very hard to explain how the cine worked, but I will try to explain it so you can understand. How it worked is that in the back of the truck Elena had brought a machine that made a very loud brrzzz and it made the other machine with two big wheels that she put on the roof of the truck move the *cine* onto the wall of the schoolhouse. We were at first so surprised at the noise and the light and the movement but then we sat on the ground and laughed as a whole village together at the crazy moving people doing flips and cracking wood on their heads and jumping up high in the air. While we watched the *cine* making light on the wall in the dark night, Elena opened a big box and gave to us, every one!, what she called little ices. “Suck on it!” she said—and at first I was nervous and the others were too because it made a stinging cold feeling on my tongue and gave my teeth a shock. But Elena did it first so I did it also. Soon it made cool sweet water in my mouth that was the best thing I have ever tasted!

We sat up so late that night that we saw stars, and Elena and I talked on the porch until two whole candles burned away and no one else remained awake.

“Where did the *cine* come from?” I asked her after the mayor had driven the machines away and all the people had gone to bed.

She said, “I got it from the Chinese embassy in the capital.”

“What is a Chinese embassy?” I asked her.

She said: “Every country has embassies—they’re large buildings that one country owns in another country—where they give help to travelers. Like if you came to visit me in the United States, and you lost your papers, you could go to the Guatemalan embassy and they would give you new ones.”

“So the building where you can go to get help is the Chinese embassy?” I asked.

She said: “Oh, no, here in Guatemala there is a U.S. embassy for helping Americans—for an example, I went there once to find a doctor for Calixta. And oh, you will think this is interesting—they had the biggest dogs there that you have ever seen! Two big guard dogs, called Rottweilers, the same color as Calixta but much larger, guard the gate and are ready to attack anyone who tries to enter with bad intentions!”

“So what is a Chinese embassy for?” I asked her.

She said, “The Chinese embassy is for helping people who come from China—although they are kind enough to also help out other people of the world by lending *cines* about kung fu fighting.”

“Where is this country of China?” I asked her.

She said, “It is far away, on the other side of the world, in a place called the Orient.”

“This is called *el oriente* right here,” I said.

She said: “Oh, no, this is only Guatemala’s *oriente*—the east side of Guatemala. China is on the world’s east side.”

I learned many things of much interest to me that night of my baby’s fiesta, by staying up late and talking to Elena. She knows so many things of importance that I will try hard to remember in case anyone ever asks me about these things again: The *cine* comes from a loud brrzzzing box; China is where they distribute kung fu; the mayor drives a blue truck and has a mustache; the Guatemalan embassy is where they collect

and redistribute lost papers; little ices are better-tasting things even than lemonade; and the U.S. embassy is a good place to observe large dogs. But most of all I will remember that this was the greatest night that has ever happened here in Linda Vista, the night we talked and laughed until almost morning. It was that kind of a night where you think that all of the rest of your life will never be anything but more happiness without the pleasure ever coming to an end.

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Elena has gone. She left when school ended, before *navidad* and the Day of the Magi, because she said the teacher would be back when the school started again so she would not be needed anymore. I said, “To me, you are needed.” But my need was not enough need to make Elena want to stay. I think this is the very worst thing that has happened to me for a long time that I can remember.

I let her be in my family! There is me and my husband and my children and my sisters and my Elena and her Calixta—our family! A good person does not leave her family! I know that she left her own first family, but I kept thinking it must have been because of them letting her get lost often as a child and because she did not have many good things to play with—but that we would give her our love and take care of her and share with her our food and never lose her and that would make everything be different. I trusted in her that because of all this we did, she would never want to go away from us ever.

But then she left and I thought: “I should not have trusted! I should not have given love! If I did not trust and if I did not love, it would not matter that she went away.”

But even though I did not want it to matter, because if it didn't matter it wouldn't hurt so badly, it did for true matter so much that I could not think of anything else. How could Elena whom I loved hurt me so badly? How could she not know what it would be like for me to have no more special friend of my own, no more *americana* all for myself? I wonder, “Does she ever think of me all the time like I think of her, and does it make her sad to know that no one anymore is left here to tell me stories of exciting faraway places

while I cook, and no one plays with my children while I do the wash?” Or does she only miss me sometimes, and even then not very much, like a fast thought when she is thirsty and the lemonade is not mine?—or maybe she does not even care like it seemed she did!, maybe she will drink whatever she is given and already forgets the taste of mine!

Everything has been craziness because of Elena going. The girls hang on my skirt all through the day and when my oldest son fell and cut his knee I went to pick him up but he said: “No! I want Elena!”

I said to him, “Elena is not here, so get up off the ground and stop crying!”

But he just sat on the ground not moving and cried louder so I smacked the angry look on his face and then not only did that not stop his crying but the girls started crying too and pulled harder on my clothes.

“Everyone stop crying and go play!” I yelled.

But they kept crying and said, “There is no one to play with!”

So I yelled, “Then play with yourselves!” and I shook them all off my skirt and turned to run inside to get away from all the noise, and what did I do? I stepped on the tail of the dog who was hiding behind the screaming children and he started to howl and it made everyone cry more!

All I wanted then was one glass of lemonade, one glass of lemonade with a great deal of sugar to keep away the headache that was coming. So I sat down alone in the kitchen with a glass and a lemon and the knife, trying to be calm despite the crying and the howling in the yard, and I cut the lemon in half and inside—worms! I took that sour lemon and with one big holler threw it right out the door, right out there toward those nonstop crying children, and SMACK it had the bad fortune to hit Hernando right in the face when he turned to come through the doorway for lunch.

“What is happening here?” he asked (in a rather calm voice for someone who got hit with a worm-full lemon).

“Nothing is happening!” I said, crossing my arms.

Hernando stared back at me for a minute and said, “*What* is wrong?”

I said: “Nothing is wrong! The only thing that would be wrong is if I had thrown the knife instead of the lemon at you!” (I got a bit of satisfaction from imagining the knife sticking out of his head.) Then I banged my face down flat on the table—the

banging aided the headache some—and said: “Okay?! So nothing is wrong! Nothing is the matter! So why don’t you leave me alone?”

I put my arms over my head to make it quiet, then, thank you to God, Hernando left and shushed the children.

But did he leave me alone? No! He came back and said, “This has gone on long enough; I can’t believe you’re still angry with Elena for leaving.”

Ugh! (I couldn’t believe he said that!) Ugh!, he made me gasp right out loud, that was such a stupid thought, and I said: “I’m not mad at Elena! What makes you think I’m mad?! Why should I care what Elena wants to do, or where she goes? If she doesn’t like it here enough to stay then why should I care?”

With my face down on the table I could say all those things and act like they were true, but when I looked up to yell at him directly and he only looked back at me in a loving way, not a fighting way, I couldn’t yell anymore and started to cry instead, and when I could finally talk again through the gasping I said to him, “Hernando, how could she have left us?”

And he said back to me something that started to change everything. He said, “Rosa, she was never ours to keep.”

We talked then for a long time, without eating, remembering all the family we have lost. I cried again for my parents and I cried for the first time for my sister’s baby, the one who died that autumn, the angel that we were all pretending not to miss. Sometime during our talking Hernando went and got from our bedroom the only photograph we have of Elena. When she took the photograph of our family that time long ago she called over our neighbor and gave to him the black camera box and showed him where to push a button, then stood with us so we could have a photo of all of us together. It is the only picture we have of her but it is a strange picture. She is standing there with us, but she is too tall, and it is only her body, without its head, that shows up in the photograph. All we have of her is her dress and her shoulders and a little stub of neck and that is all. It is as if she is there and not there at the same time, as if even then she was already starting—as she always said she would—to go away. Looking at the picture together, I said to Hernando, “Do not be mad at me for this, but sometimes I wish I could have gone with her, just for a little while.”

He said: “But that would not have worked. You would not have been happy. You and Elena are too different. What is good about Elena is the excitement she brings, the new ideas, the things she will try without regard for what is traditional. What is good about you is the pleasure you bring to what is normal—the way you rock the children and make them laugh, the way you give me something to look forward to every morning. Your gifts are good ones to keep at home, and Elena’s are good ones to take away and share.”

I said, “She was always going to have to leave, no matter what I did, wasn’t she?”

He said back to me, “It is as natural for her to leave as it is for birds to fly, so why be angry with either for soaring away?”

My husband, Hernando, is a good man. I am the luckiest woman I know.

So finally, I only missed Elena greatly. She has become part of the history and remembrances of my family. Whenever anyone asks now about the stain on the lemon tree by the kitchen door, we smile and tell them the story of the day Elena tripped into the trunk and scared us all, with the thorn deep in her scalp and the blood running all down her face, calming everyone else while we screamed even though she was the one who was hurt! It has become our tradition to soothe pains by saying, “Be brave like Elena!” and soon the tears stop.

The sound of her name makes glad not only us, but the horse too, for when Eben walks too slowly while working—more slowly than normal—Hernando clucks at him and says, “Let’s go Eben, let’s go see if we can find Elena!” and he insists it excites the animal and quickens his step. When I am alone I take pleasure in humming the tune she would whistle when she worked, and when the new milk goat had kids their names came to the children easily. The red one is Elena; the black one, Calixta.

So in some ways, though I believe we will never see her again, she is not all the way gone. She just waits for us to remember her so she can return and visit us in our thoughts for a while. It took me some time, but finally I realized there can be love even without togetherness, and that is how I have gotten settled with Elena’s departure. For it is true, what Hernando said to me. She could never have stayed forever, just as I could never go.