

Beyond Ashes

A TRUE STORY
OF SURVIVAL
AND TRIUMPH

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CHAPTER 1

Little Girl Lost

Dazzling sunlight danced on the courtyard walls of our home in Guadalajara, and gaudy parrots chattered overhead as I skipped into the house, where sweet cinnamon smells drifted from the kitchen. Oh yes! Mamá stood by the stove, stirring steaming rice pudding with a stick of *canela* (cinnamon). My three-year-old mouth wanted some of that right away!

“Por favor, Mamacita, ¡quiero un poco ahora!” (“Please, Mommy, I want some now!”)

“No, Marlyn, this is for lunch. You’ll have to wait until then.”

I pouted, but not for long. Grandma Edith, her curly auburn braided hair coiled at the nape of her neck, stepped briskly into the kitchen. “I’m going to Zapopan to give a Bible study to Señora Figueroa.” Grandma Edith was a Christian book evangelist and Bible worker. “She has two children about the ages of Frank [my nine-year-old brother] and Wanda [my five-year-old sister]. Do you suppose they would like to come with me and play while I am giving the Bible study?”

Before Mamá could answer, I began jumping up and down, squealing with excitement. “I want to go too, Mamacita! Please, can I go?”

Grandma Edith was willing, but Mamá hesitated. “Are you sure? I don’t want her to be underfoot . . .”

“I won’t bother her; I’ll be good! I promise!” I pleaded.

“Well, all right,” Mamá said resignedly. “Doña Triné!” she called. A moment later our nanny appeared at the kitchen door. “Can you get Marlyn ready for a trip to Zapopan? She’s going with Grandma Edith. Put her pink dress on her; she looks nice in it. And get Wanda ready, because she’s going too, unless she doesn’t want to. And tell Frank to change into a clean outfit and comb his hair.”

I was getting to go! Doña Triné took me to the bedroom Wanda and

Beyond Ashes

I shared and started getting me ready. “Stand still, Marlyn, and put your hands up over your head.” I put my arms up, but I was far too excited to stand still. The dress went on, but then she had to comb my hair and secure it with a clip. “Stand still, Marlyn,” she pleaded. But how could someone stand still when she was this excited?

A few minutes later, the four of us were climbing onto the bus. Somehow Grandma Edith found us three seats together on the crowded bus, and we settled ourselves in, with me nestled securely on her lap. Spreading trees and people on bicycles flew by us as the bus wound through the traffic, and in no time it was slowing down as we reached the village of Zapopan.

Mrs. Figueroa, tall and slender with a face alight with good humor, greeted us at the door to her house, her two children peering from behind her. “¡Entren, por favor!” she invited, and we walked into a room filled with enough knickknacks and pictures to keep a child engaged for hours. Her children, José and Rosita, quickly ran with the three of us children out to the courtyard to play. The four of them found plenty of things to do for fun; I, on the other hand, was considered a tagalong to be ignored, and I was too little to understand their games anyway.

No matter; that courtyard was a fascinating place. Creeping vines studded with blue flowers climbed the walls, a bed of red asters smiled shyly up at me, and a group of warblers swooped in for a landing on a piece of statuary. When I tried to catch one, though, they hastily flew off in a burst of wings. But then I spotted a section of the courtyard wall covered in blue-and-white tile work, with a fountain of water pouring from its middle. I tried to reach up and play in the waterspout, but it was too high, so I contented myself by dipping my hands in the pool at the bottom.

“Marlyn! Get out of the water!” shouted Wanda. I looked over at her unhappily. She wasn’t the boss of me! But I got up anyway and wandered off in the direction of the doorway to the living room. I knew Grandma Edith was in that room full of interesting knickknacks.

“No, Marlyn, not in there! We’re not supposed to bother Grandma Edith.” Now it was Frank yelling at me! Maybe I could play with the big kids. But they shooed me off and went on with their play. Disgusted, I plumped down by a small palm tree in the middle of the courtyard. This was taking too long, and I was getting hungry. Some rice pudding would

Little Girl Lost

taste pretty good right about now. The best thing to do might be to walk home and get some lunch.

I found the gate leading to the street. Its latch was very high, so I stretched up as far as I possibly could. I was just a couple of inches shy of being able to reach it. I found a stray rock lying a few feet away and shoved it next to the gate and under the latch. The next attempt succeeded! I kicked the rock away, opened the gate, and skipped out onto the street.

The next job was to find home. It hadn't taken very long to get here on the bus, so home probably was just up ahead. Coming my way down the dusty street was a teenage girl in a colorful skirt. As we met, she bent down to talk to me. "Niñita, ¿adónde vas?" ("Little girl, where are you going?") she asked.

Confident I was almost home, I replied, "Voy a casa." ("I'm going home.") I pointed straight ahead to a nearby village. The girl straightened up, gave me another smile, and went on her way.

I kept walking. That village up ahead seemed to be taking longer to get to than I thought it would. But finally, there I was. I looked up and down the street. None of the houses looked like mine, but surely the people living in them knew where my family lived. I picked a big white house, walked up to the door, and knocked.

A sweet-faced young woman opened the door. Behind her, bending to peer around her, was a most unpleasant-looking man with a thin mustache stretched across his upper lip. So I directed my request to the woman: "I'm hungry, and I want some rice pudding. Can you take me to Mamá and rice pudding?"

"Come on in, little girl. What's your name?"

"I'm Marlyn."

"Well, Marlyn, we don't have any rice pudding, but we do have some frijoles and tortillas. How does that sound?"

That sounded good to me, and soon I was happily chowing down on the frijoles and tortillas. Once I was full, I told the woman I was ready to go see Mamá. She promised to take me, but first, she said, I needed a nap. She took me into a bedroom and helped me onto the bed, and I happily settled down for a nap.

When I woke up, I again announced that I was ready to go see Mamá. The woman promised to take me soon, but not yet. *Not yet? Why not?* I

Beyond Ashes

wondered. Then I got very sleepy, and that is the last thing I remembered until late the next day.

The rest of the story unfolded when I was not around to know about it, so I will have to tell it as it was told to me.

When Grandma Edith finished the Bible study, she gathered her things and stepped into the courtyard to call the children. Wanda and Frank came running. But, *Where was Marlyn?* Wanda and Frank looked at each other blankly, dismay spreading over their faces as they realized they had not seen their sister in some time. Grandma Edith, realizing they did not know my whereabouts, became dismayed as well. Everyone, including Señora Figueroa and her two children, began looking for me everywhere—in every nook and cranny in each room of the house, double-checking the courtyard, and finally out on the street. “Marlyn! Marlyn!” they called desperately, fanning out through the streets and fields. Then Grandma Edith encountered a teenage girl walking down the street who recognized the name Marlyn right away.

“¡Señora! ¡Señora! My name is María, and I saw a little girl who called herself Marlyn walking down the street all by herself.” María was breathless with the news.

“Yes, María. You’ve seen a little girl in a pink dress walking down the street by herself?”

“Yes, a pink dress!”

“You have? When? Where?” exclaimed Grandma Edith in frantic joy.

“It was about an hour ago, a mile or so down the street. She said she was going home, to the next village.”

Buoyed by the good news, the searchers flew down the street until they reached the section of the road María had told them about. There they began a careful door-to-door search, and the people at most of the houses excitedly joined the search. The only exception was the couple at one house: a sweet-faced woman and a man with a pencil mustache. Not only were they not helpful; they were downright nasty.

Grandma Edith searched and prayed, prayed and searched. The last thing she wanted to do was to have to go home and tell her daughter that her little girl was lost. Sick with remorse and fear, she finally was constrained to corral Frank and Wanda and get on the bus to go home—but not before notifying the police and the newspaper. She rummaged through her purse and dug out a picture of me to leave with each place.

Little Girl Lost

But before she left the police station, the police had a terrifying piece of news for her. “Señora Vega, I must tell you that there is a child kidnapping ring at work here in Guadalajara. Dozens of children have been abducted and sold to the underground market.” This latest bit of news made an intolerable situation even more terrifying.

And then she had to head to the bus stop with Wanda and Frank and, once home, confess to her daughter the dreadful news that her baby girl had disappeared and could not be found. My mother listened in disbelief for several seconds before sinking onto a chair. “You looked everywhere? Where? Where is everywhere? Are you sure she wasn’t just hiding under a bed or in a closet? You know what she’s like! She could be anywhere!” Then, as the truth of the words she had just spoken hit her, she began sobbing. Yes, her little girl was adventurous, trusting, and utterly fearless, and therefore could be anywhere—*anywhere!*

“We looked in all those places several times, as well as at every house for miles around! But let’s call Monrad! Surely he’ll know what to do!” My father was president of the Guadalajara Mission. He had left that morning on a trip visiting churches and church members throughout the area and was not expected back for several weeks.

“Yes, yes, the conference officials will know where to find him; they have his itinerary. I’ll call the mission office right away!”

The people at the conference were aghast at the news of the missing little girl and immediately began making telephone calls to locate my father. However, he was deep in the mountains on horseback, and all efforts to find him proved futile.

That news was the one-two punch for my mother that nearly finished her. Her baby girl was gone and no one could find her, and what was even worse, her husband was nowhere to be found. She was on her own, except for God.

Except for God! That was it! It was Wednesday; prayer meeting night, and most of the church members would be there. Together, they would form an invincible army. “Come, everyone, we’re going to prayer meeting; it’s almost time! Doña Triné, can you fix a quick bite to eat for the children? I’m not hungry. Are you, Grandma Edith? No, I didn’t think so—but Frank and Wanda might be—get them fed, and after that they should probably change into clothes that aren’t so dusty.”

Prayer meeting that night was an agonizing supplication for the return

Beyond Ashes

of a little girl in a pink dress who was wound around the hearts of all the church members. Afterward Nacho Ponce, the mission treasurer, announced that he was going back to where I was last seen and would search until he found me. Nine-year-old Frank asked if he could go too. My mother and Señor Ponce both agreed, and the two drove off into the night in the treasurer's car.

No one slept that night. Grandma Edith stayed up all night storming heaven's gate for the safe return of her little Marlyn. Mamá was beside herself with misery and fear, so distraught that she became physically ill. Grandma Edith interrupted her prayer long enough to make an herbal drink for her, trying to calm her. It seemed to help, but not much. Even Wanda, only five years old, shared in the general distress. She kept sobbing, "The pool. She was playing in the pool. She must have gone in the pool and drowned. My fault. It's my fault because I wasn't watching her. Oh Jesus, please forgive me!"

Morning finally came. Red-eyed and exhausted, the family dressed for the day. Frank came in, dejected and spent: no Marlyn. Wanda went out and retrieved the daily newspaper from the front yard. "Look, Mamá, Marlyn is in the newspaper!" Mamá looked at the paper. Sure enough, there on the front page was the picture that Grandma had given the newspaper, along with a large banner headline: "*Niña Robada*" ("Kidnapped Girl") in large print. The story beneath the headline told of my disappearance and included the information, "The girl is an American citizen. The Mexican police will turn the kidnappers over to the American authorities, and the penalty for kidnapping in the United States is the death sentence." Mamá read the story rapidly, then handed it wordlessly to Grandma Edith. Grandma read it too, then said, "If someone has taken Marlyn, maybe . . . maybe this will convince them to return her."

Suddenly loud pounding came from the front door. Rafa, one of the mission secretaries, had a story to tell. She had intended to pray all night, she told the two women, but fell asleep and had a dream. "I was in a field with sagebrush all around—and lots of holes in the ground. At the bottom of one of the holes there was Marlyn! Then I woke up suddenly. You know, I believe the Lord sent me this dream. When I told my sister, she laughed and said the dream was caused by indigestion. But I am sure she is wrong!"

Little Girl Lost

Grandma Edith and Mamá had been listening intently. Now they stood in thoughtful silence. Then Grandma Edith said, "It is from God."

"Yes," agreed Mamá. "He woke you up right away after the dream, so you would not forget it. This is how God does things."

Grandma Edith grabbed her purse and smoothed her hair with her hand. "I'm going, and I will look in every hole in that village until I find her! Rafa, will you join me? But Anita, I think you should stay here in case Monrad calls and you can tell him about the dream. You are the best one to be with Wanda and Frank to keep their spirits up." Rafa and Mamá both nodded their agreement.

Still sobbing, Mamá hugged Grandma Edith hard. "Go get Marlyn and bring her home!"

The bus ride to the village where I had been last seen seemed interminable. But before long they were there. News of the search quickly spread through the village, and the friendly villagers joined the search. Best of all, María showed up and volunteered to help. "Señoras," she told them, "there is a large company here that makes bricks. They dig holes in the ground to get the clay for them. There are many fields full of holes the brickmakers have left. I know where all the fields are, and we will look together until we find your little girl!"

With María's help, they worked their way through field after field, running from hole to hole in the hot sun, carrying walking sticks and working their way around the sagebrush. María was swift and it was hard to keep up with her, but urgency sped them on. The unpleasant-looking man with the pencil mustache appeared too, and said he might know what had happened to the little girl. "Some travelers on burros went past this morning, and they had a little girl with them that was crying loudly. I think it might have been your little girl." He gestured back the way Grandma and Rafa had come.

They thanked the man but kept on searching the holes. If the dream was from God as they believed, then they were going about their hunt the right way. And that man did not seem trustworthy!

So many fields, so many holes, but no little girl! It was afternoon when, on the way to yet another field, they encountered an elderly man. "We are looking for a three-year-old girl wearing a pink dress. We think she might be in a hole in one of the fields around here. Do you have any idea where she might be?"

Beyond Ashes

“Sí, Señora.” The old man stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Early this morning I saw a woman dump a burlap sack into a hole. Who knows? Your little girl could be in that sack! Follow me! I can take you to the place!” He took off at a trot through a path overgrown with manzanita, and the three women struggled to keep up with him, bending low to get through the manzanita. They were worn out by the all-day search and caked in sweat and dust. Eventually, the manzanita ended and they found themselves in a field of sagebrush and holes. It was exactly the way Rafa had seen it in her dream!

The old man pointed. “Try that hole over there.” And then—he simply vanished. Rafa ran over to the hole he had indicated and let out a scream. “Over here! There’s something at the bottom of this hole!” Grandma and María rushed over and looked down at the little girl in a pink dress, burlap tangled around her legs and feet. María, the youngest and nimblest, lowered herself into the hole and handed up the child. “¡La niñita perdida fue encontrada!” (“The little lost girl has been found!”) The message spread through the watching crowd.

“Is she OK?” That was the next question. Yes, still breathing! But the child was unconscious and the little body was hot, far too hot. Grandma Edith carried me as the three women ran to the police station to share the good news and ask for help getting me to the mission hospital. The police found some cool cloths to place on my head, and then Grandma Edith, Rafa, and I were treated to a high-speed ride to the mission hospital at Guadalajara, sirens blaring. I didn’t get to enjoy it, however, because I was still unconscious; I had been drugged.

At the hospital the nurses placed me in an ice-filled bath to bring down my temperature. The doctor shook his head, incredulous. “Her temperature is 105, and she has heatstroke. Another hour in that hole and we’d have lost her. All I can say is that you are very lucky to have this child alive!”

María, the dream, the old man—the timing was all perfect. God’s hand was in all of it. I was lost, but never truly lost, for God knew where I was all along, and He showed my whereabouts to those who loved me.

Time and time again, I have lost my way and blundered into circumstances that could have proved my ruin. But I have never been lost to God; always He has known where I was. Time after time He has pulled me back to Him, and He has rescued me for a life of service to His cause.

Little Girl Lost

*He also brought me up out of a horrible pit,
Out of the miry clay,
And set my feet upon a rock,
And established my steps (Psalm 40:2, NKJV).*